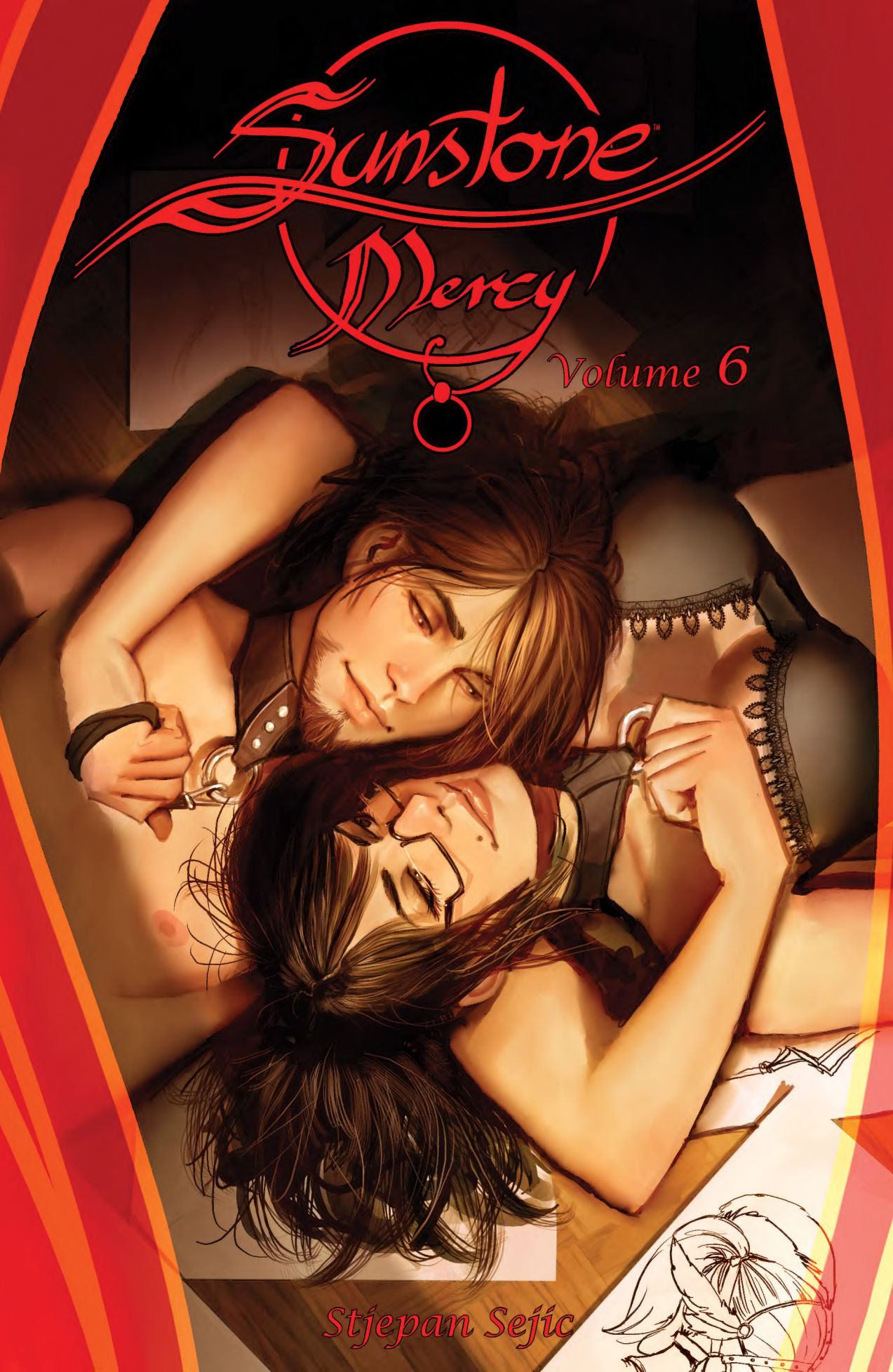
Gunstone™
Mercy
Volume 6
Stjepan Sejic

Top Cow Productions Presents...

Created by Stjepan Sejic

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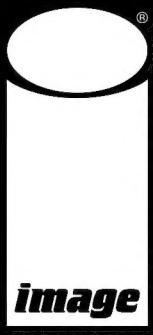

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Top Cow Productions Presents...

Stjepan Sejic
Creator, Artist, and Writer

Stjepan Sejic
Cover Art and Logo Design

Ryan Cady
Editor

LEATHER ?
INTO SOME WEIRD SHIT?
CALL ALAN S/M BENSON!

And so it begins anew.

For a long time I considered what to write here. What do you say to an audience that is already familiar with your work on this subject?

Well, I guess, the first and most important thing would be, forget about *Sunstone*! For a moment at least. Don't spend your time with this book thinking of another. A book is its own kind of a relationship after all, and it's not cool to cheat.

Now, I know it sounds silly for the writer to ever tell this to their audience, but there is value in forgetting, if only for a little while. Forgetting makes you sink into a story without asking the dumbest of questions. That being:

How does *Mercy* compare to...

I can answer that question before it's even finished.

It doesn't.

It won't compare until the storyline is finished and you can competently see each story for what they are. Instead I ask you to forget, and I hope for you to enjoy. For the book you have in your hands right now is the beginning of a journey, and we have merely exited the front doors. Sunstone's powerful moments and its ultimate impact came from its subsequent issues. Same is with *Mercy*. It too will make you laugh and it will break your hearts over and over again, if you let it.

Now, the story itself will expand on *Sunstone* and later even continue it as its events span the times before *Sunstone* and end after it. It is a longer story, a *Lord of the Rings* to *Sunstone's Hobbit*. And coincidentally this whole thing ends with a golden ring as well so make of that what you will.

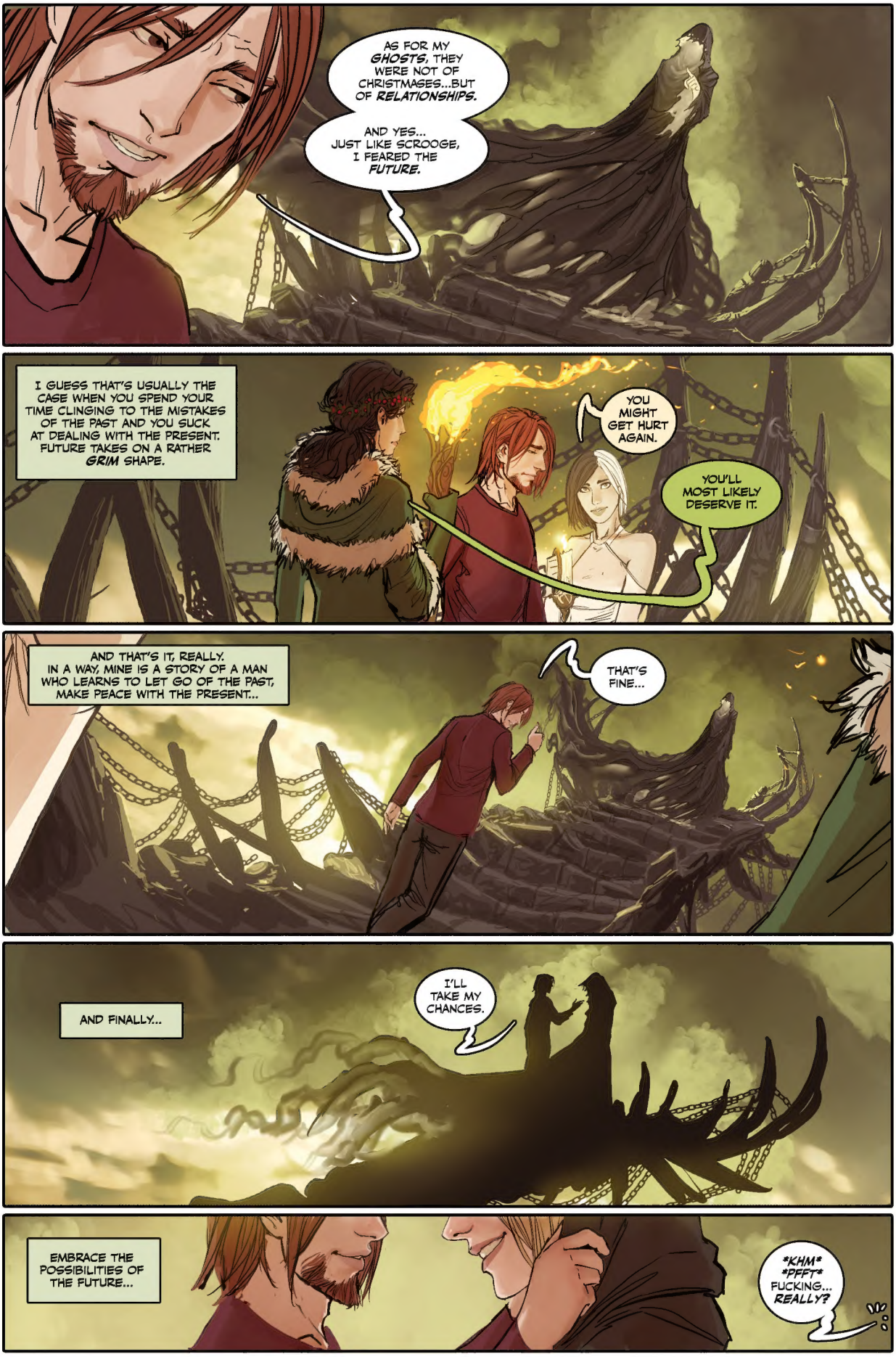
In the end, what else is left to say but:

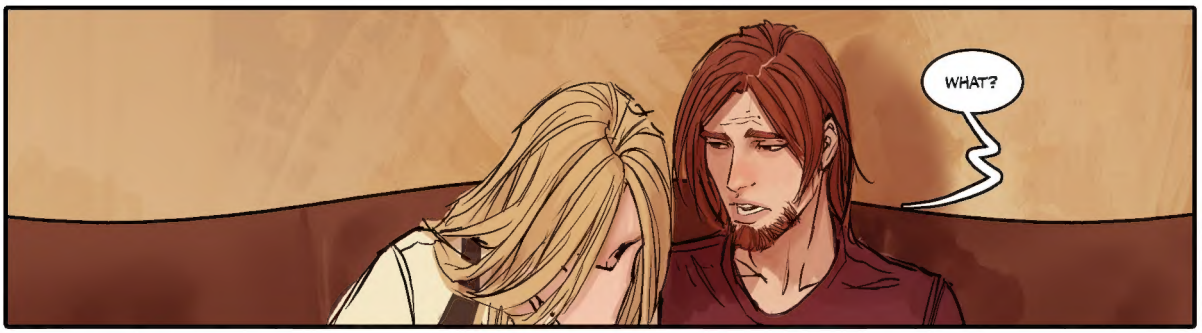
Welcome to *Mercy*. A story of two people going on an amazing journey and learning an important lesson.

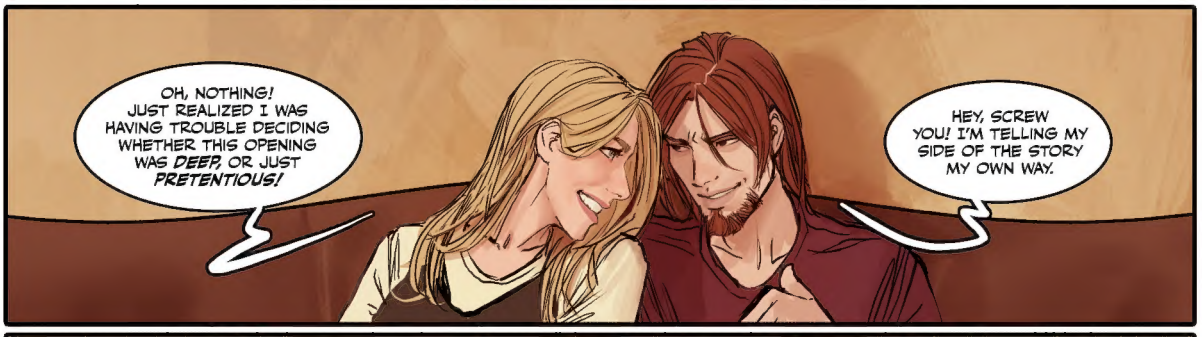
If you want to have a chance at embracing your future, you must learn to let go of the mistakes of your past.

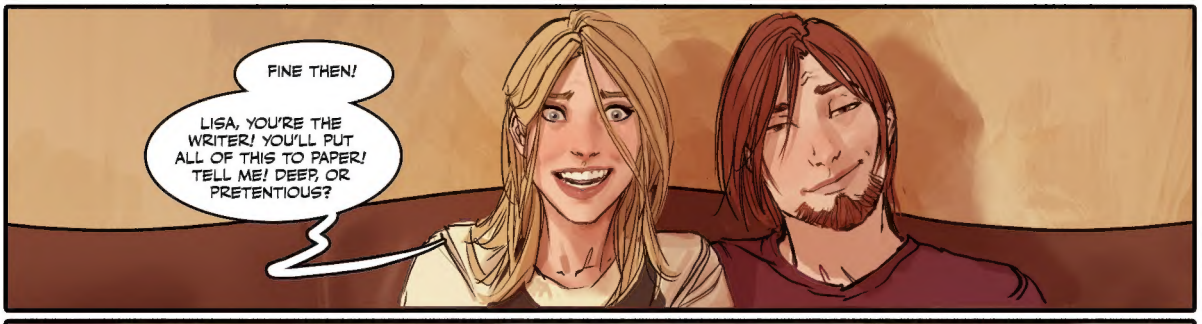
SEE IF THIS SOUNDS FAMILIAR?
A COMPLICATED PAST TURNS A MAN INTO A BITTER CYNIC.
HE SPENDS HIS DAYS GRUMPY AND ALONE...
IN COMES THE *GHOST* OF HIS OLD PARTNER WITH A GRIM WARNING --
*"TONIGHT YOU WILL BE VISITED BY **THREE GHOSTS!**"*
AND SO, A MISERABLE MAN IS GIVEN A CHANCE TO CHANGE. TO BECOME A BETTER PERSON.
EBENEZER SCROOGE -- *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* BY CHARLES DICKENS.

ONCE THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I STRONGLY RELATED TO THE CHARACTER OF OLD SCROOGE...
FOR... MULTIPLE REASONS.
I MEAN, TO SOME EXTENT, I GUESS WE ALL DEAL WITH OUR OWN GHOSTS OF PAST, PRESENT, AND THINGS YET TO COME...
DIFFERENT GHOSTS FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE...
AS FOR ME, I'VE COME TO PERSONIFY MINE AS THREE IMPORTANT WOMEN IN MY LIFE...
WELL... FOUR IF WE TAKE INTO ACCOUNT ALLISON, MY PERSONAL JACOB MARLEY. LORD KNOWS SHE TOO WAS QUITE PROFICIENT AT POINTING OUT MY FUCKUPS AS WELL AS RATTLING CHAINS AND SHACKLES.


AS FOR MY GHOSTS, THEY WERE NOT OF CHRISTMASES...BUT OF RELATIONSHIPS.
AND YES... JUST LIKE SCROOGE, I FEARED THE FUTURE.
I GUESS THAT'S USUALLY THE CASE WHEN YOU SPEND YOUR TIME CLINGING TO THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST AND YOU SUCK AT DEALING WITH THE PRESENT. FUTURE TAKES ON A RATHER GRIM SHAPE.
YOU MIGHT GET HURT AGAIN.
YOU'LL MOST LIKELY DESERVE IT.
AND THAT'S IT, REALLY. IN A WAY, MINE IS A STORY OF A MAN WHO LEARNS TO LET GO OF THE PAST, MAKE PEACE WITH THE PRESENT...
THAT'S FINE...
AND FINALLY...
I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES.
EMBRACE THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE FUTURE...
KHM *PFFT* FUCKING... REALLY?


WHAT?


OH, NOTHING! JUST REALIZED I WAS HAVING TROUBLE DECIDING WHETHER THIS OPENING WAS *DEEP*, OR JUST *PRETENTIOUS!*
HEY, SCREW YOU! I'M TELLING MY SIDE OF THE STORY MY OWN WAY.


FINE THEN!
LISA, YOU'RE THE WRITER! YOU'LL PUT ALL OF THIS TO PAPER! TELL ME! DEEP, OR PRETENTIOUS?

UH... A BIT OF *BOTH?*
I CAN WORK WITH BOTH.
BUT LISTEN!
THE MISSUS IS PREPARING A ROMANTIC DINNER TONIGHT, AND I HAVE NO INTENTION OF BEING LATE...WELL, BEING *TOO LATE,* AT LEAST.
SO, ANNE, ALAN...HOWZABOUT WE KEEP THE POINTLESS INTERRUPTIONS DOWN TO A *MINIMUM* AND YOU EACH TELL ME YOUR SIDE OF THINGS.

FINE!
START US OFF, SHAKESPEARE!
VERY WELL, FAIR LADY. 'TWAS THE AUTUMN OF MY YOUTH...
GET BENT!
SIGH...
MERCY
THIS MIGHT TAKE A WHILE

ANYHOW...IT WAS AUTUMN...
SO YEAH!
UHH...
HMMMM...
WELL?
...
SIGH
THING IS, I'M KINDA IN A VERY AWKWARD SPOT HERE.
LIKE...
ANY WAY I SPIN IT, THERE IS REALLY NO GOOD WAY TO TELL THIS PART.
IS IT BECAUSE...UH... I MEAN, YOU TOLD ME ANNE KNOWS ABOUT YOUR PAST...
OH... I KNOW!
YEAH, ANNE'S NOT THE PROBLEM. YOU ARE!
THIS FIRST PART IS ACTUALLY ABOUT ALLY AND ME...
AND, WELL... SHE'S YOUR WIFE, SO...
AWWW! LOOK AT YOU BEING UNCHARACTERISTICALLY RESPECTFUL!
OH, FUCK OFF!
HEH! IT'S FINE, ALAN.
I MEAN IT!
ALLY ALREADY FILLED ME IN ON MOST OF IT.
IN FACT, HERE'S HOW WE'LL DO THIS. I WANT YOU TO TELL IT LIKE YOU ARE SPEAKING TO SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ABOUT YOU.
THAT GOES FOR THE BOTH OF YOU.
SO...
HOW 'BOUT IT? YOU DO THE TALKING...
AND I'LL DO WHAT I DO BEST.

"TELL IT LIKE I'M SPEAKING TO SOMEONE WHO KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT ME," HUH?
YEAH...I CAN DO THAT.
WELL, I GUESS... IT STARTED WITH A SKETCHBOOK.
MY SKETCHBOOK.
ALAN, YOU THERE?
HEY, CHRIS! YEAH, COME IN!

YOU GOING, OR WHAT?

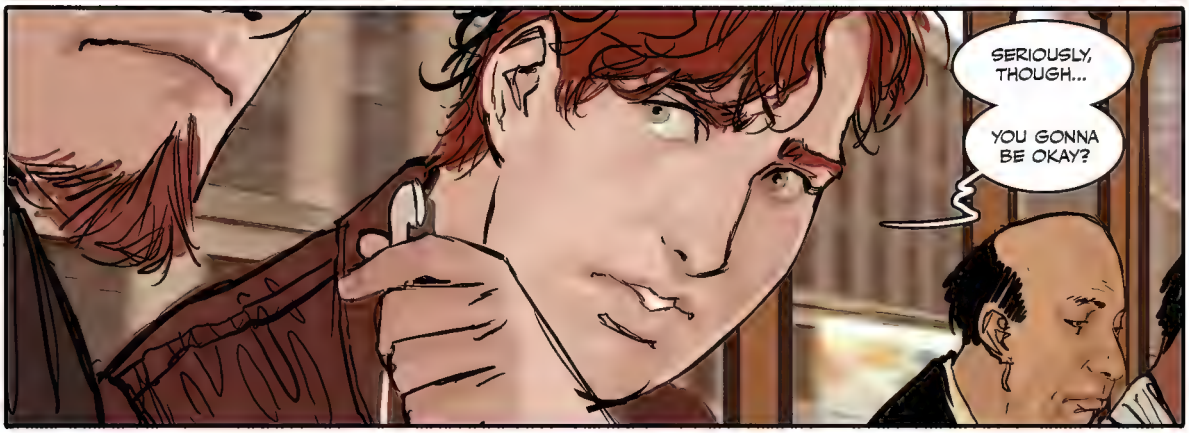
YEAH. I GUESS... SORRY, I'LL BE READY IN A BIT.

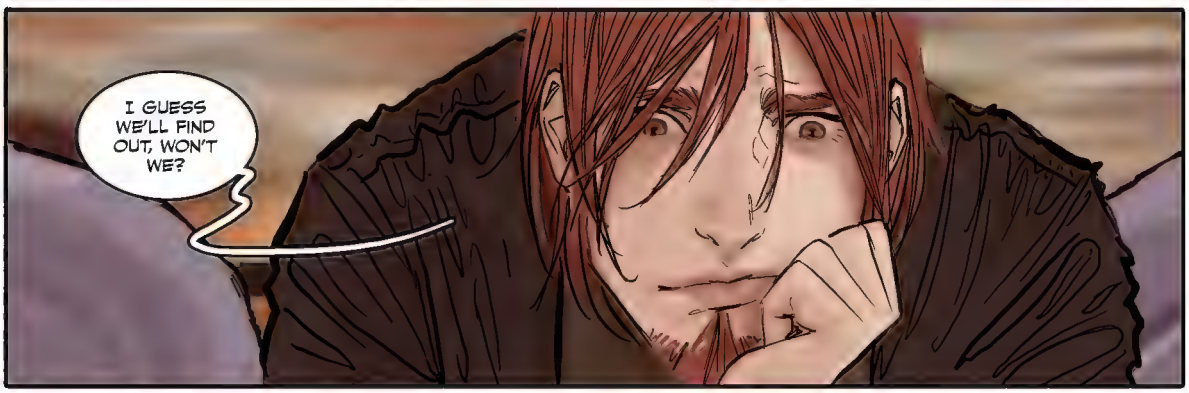
UH...RIGHT! I GUESS I WOULDN'T BE TOO EAGER TO GO BACK EITHER.
YOU WANNA LIKE, MAYBE SKIP TODAY? I DON'T KNOW.
UH...CAN YOU?

NAH, I'M GOING.
I SKIPPED ENOUGH DAYS ALREADY.

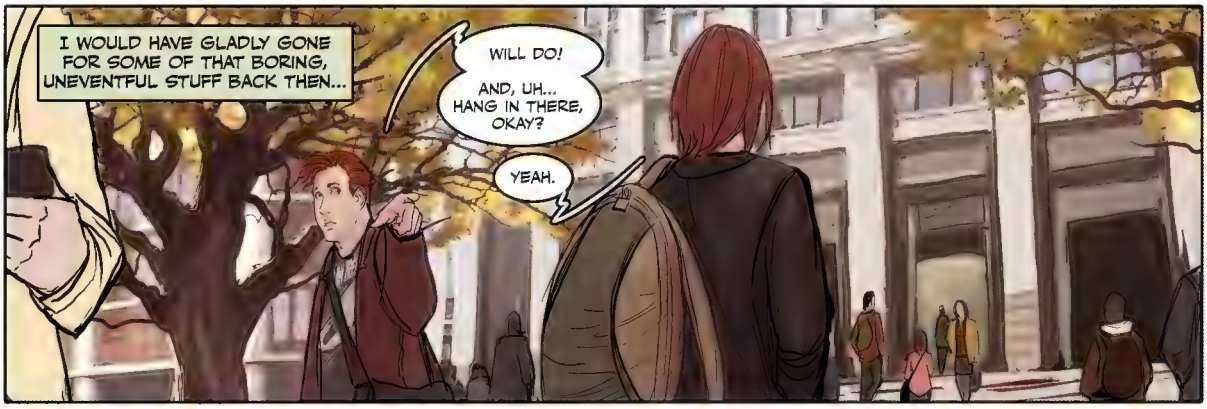
YOU'RE TAKING THAT?
CLICK!
YES.
UH...
WHAT'S WITH THE *ARM?*
...SO I'M PRETTY MUCH ALL PACKED AND MY OLD MAN GOES -- *"HEY, CHRIS, HELP US LOAD UP SOME FURNITURE..."*
ALL GOOD AT FIRST. A FEW CUPBOARDS, NOTHING MAJOR, BUT THEN WE GOT TO THE DAMN *BED.*
MMM...

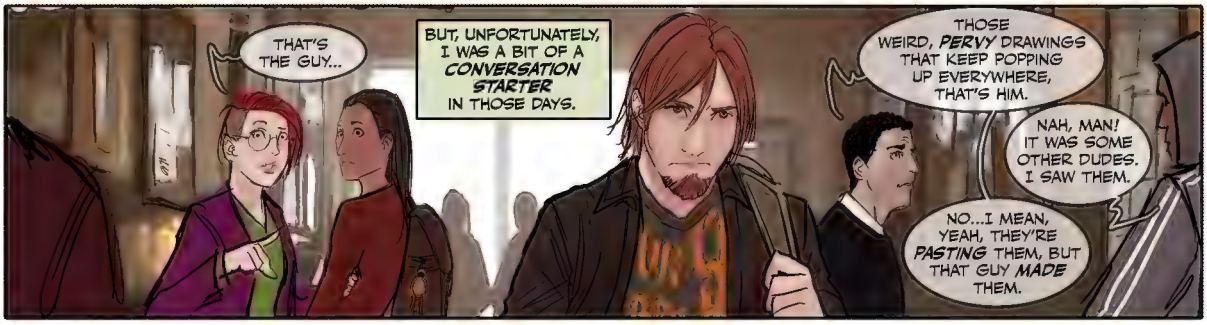
THEY SAID "THREE-TWO-ONE" TO DROP THE BED...I THOUGHT WE WERE DROPPING AFTER ONE.
THEY HAD OTHER PLANS.
YIKES!
I SCREAMED THE SAME THING, FOLLOWED BY SEVERAL "MOTHERFUCKS!"

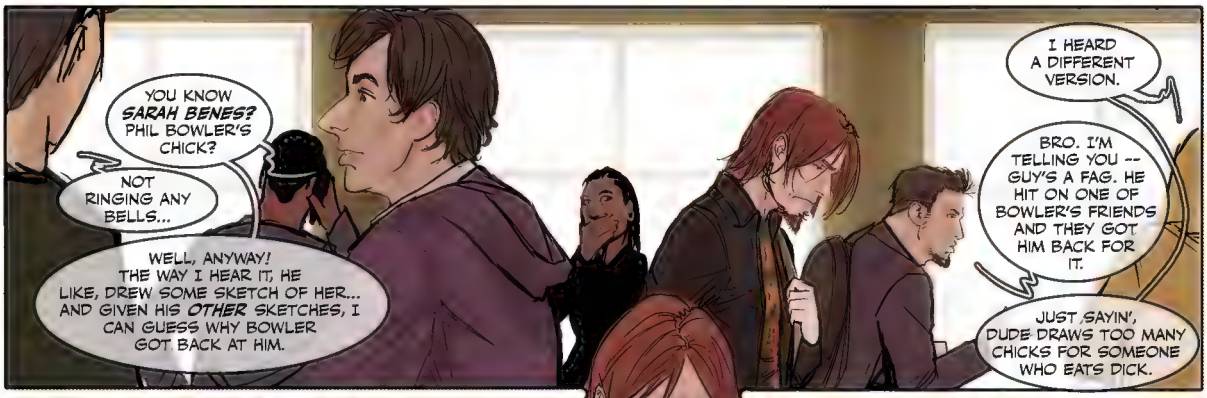

SERIOUSLY, THOUGH...
YOU GONNA BE OKAY?


I GUESS WE'LL FIND OUT, WON'T WE?

CHRIS CONNELLY WAS THE FIRST ON A VERY SHORT LIST OF FRIENDS I MADE DURING COLLEGE.
IT BEGAN AS A CHANCE ENCOUNTER. I WAS MOVING INTO THE CHEAP STUDENT HOUSING BUILDING WHERE HE LIVED. HE SAW ME AND DID THE MOST "CHRIS" THING POSSIBLE... HE OFFERED A HAND.
HEY, BUDDY, YOU NEED SOME HELP?
LL&P
HUH?
HELP? YOU NEED SOME? THAT IS, IF YOU'RE MOVING IN...AND NOT, LIKE, ROBBING THE PLACE?
HEH. YEAH, I COULD USE A HAND, THANKS!
I'M CHRIS!
ALAN!
THAT A STAR TREK SHIRT?
YEAH, YOU WATCH IT?
HERE AND THERE.
LL&P
FOR HOW IMPORTANT, AND AT TIMES, UNEXPECTEDLY ODD OUR FRIENDSHIP WAS, IT HAD A VERY MUNDANE BEGINNING...
BUT THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH MUNDANE.
UH, ALAN... I REALLY HAVE TO GO NOW.
HUH? OH, YEAH, DUDE! HAVE A GOOD ONE!


I WOULD HAVE GLADLY GONE FOR SOME OF THAT BORING, UNEVENTFUL STUFF BACK THEN...
WILL DO!
AND, UH... HANG IN THERE, OKAY?
YEAH.


THAT'S THE GUY...
BUT, UNFORTUNATELY, I WAS A BIT OF A CONVERSATION STARTER IN THOSE DAYS.
THOSE WEIRD, PERVY DRAWINGS THAT KEEP POPPING UP EVERYWHERE, THAT'S HIM.
NAH, MAN! IT WAS SOME OTHER DUDES. I SAW THEM.
NO...I MEAN, YEAH, THEY'RE PASTING THEM, BUT THAT GUY MADE THEM.

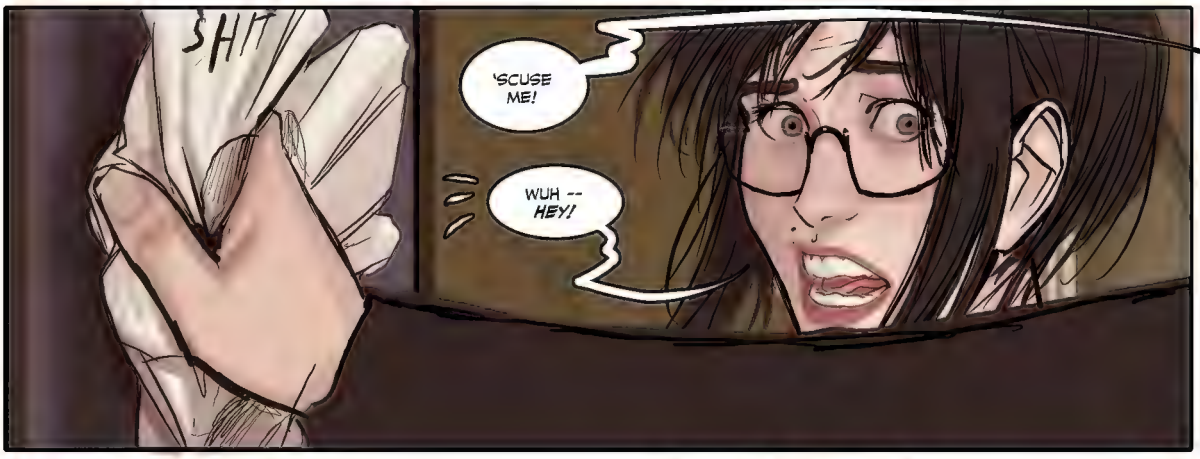

YOU KNOW SARAH BENES? PHIL BOWLER'S CHICK?
NOT RINGING ANY BELLS...
WELL, ANYWAY! THE WAY I HEAR IT, HE LIKE, DREW SOME SKETCH OF HER... AND GIVEN HIS OTHER SKETCHES, I CAN GUESS WHY BOWLER GOT BACK AT HIM.
I HEARD A DIFFERENT VERSION.
BRO. I'M TELLING YOU -- GUY'S A FAG. HE HIT ON ONE OF BOWLER'S FRIENDS AND THEY GOT HIM BACK FOR IT.
JUST SAYIN', DUDE DRAWS TOO MANY CHICKS FOR SOMEONE WHO EATS DICK.

YOU DIDN'T SEE THE DRAWINGS?
WHAT DRAWINGS?
AWWW, YOU MISSED IT!
GIVE IT A DAY -- THEY KEEP POPPING BACK UP.
SIGH...
SO THESE GUYS COPIED THE SKETCHES AND STAPLED THEM ON WALLS ALL OVER CAMPUS.
HAH! I WAS WONDERING WHAT THOSE THINGS WERE.
FUCKED UP STUFF, RIGHT?
OH, YOU POOR, INNOCENT SOUL! I REALLY NEED TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THE WONDERS OF HENTAI!

DUDE, HURRY UP!
'SOKAY! I'M DONE!
SO YEAH... COLLEGE.
MY FIRST MONTH ON THAT SMALL CAMPUS I WAS HARSHLY REMINDED OF AN IMPORTANT LIFE LESSON...

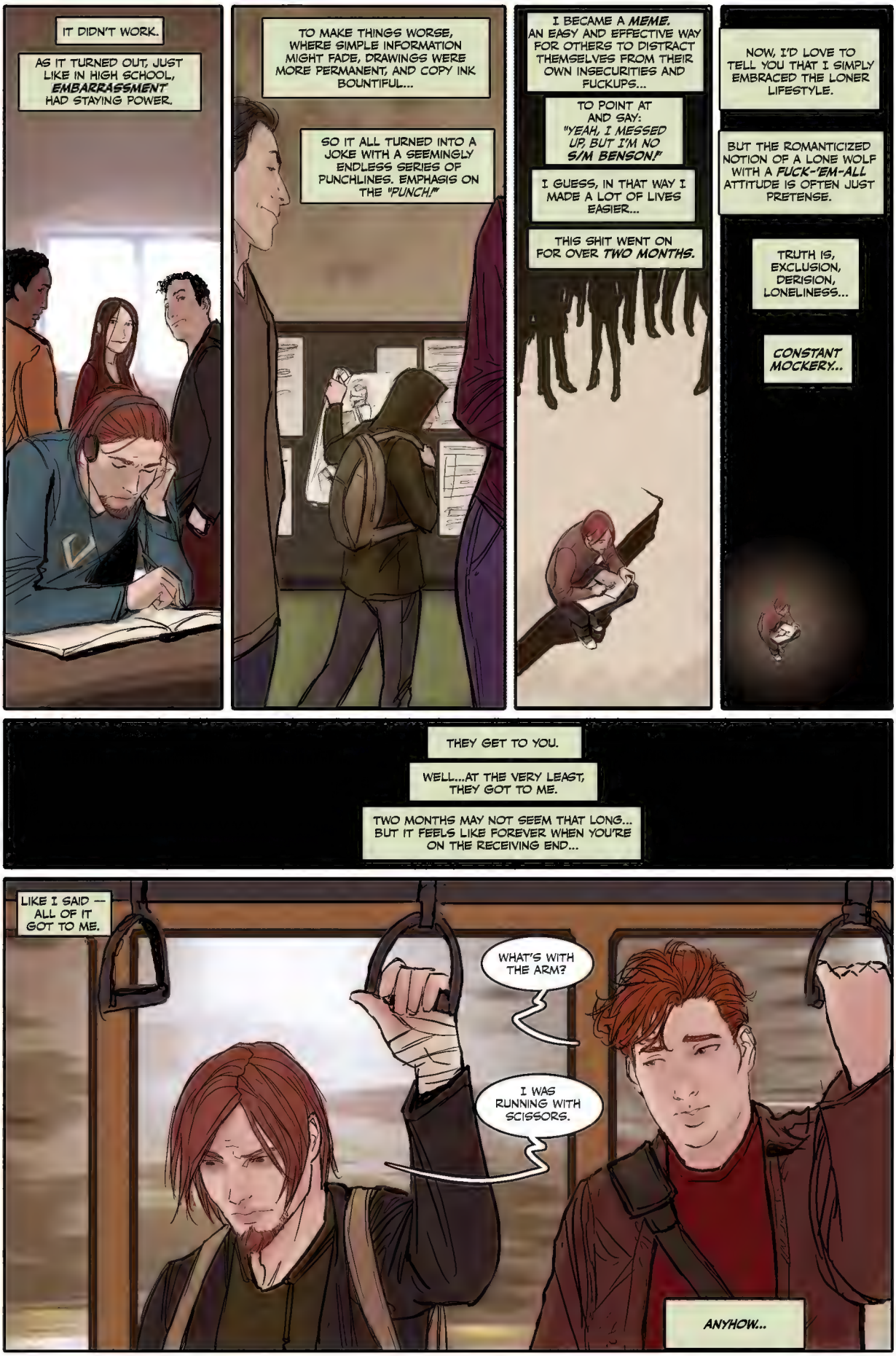
THERE ARE TWO SUREFIRE WAYS TO FIND YOURSELF THE CENTER OF ATTENTION --
EITHER YOU DO SOMETHING AMAZING...
OR YOU EMBARRASS THE SHIT OUT OF YOURSELF!

I WENT WITH THE SECOND OPTION...
NOT BY CHOICE, BELIEVE YOU ME.
INTO SOME WEIRD SHIT?
CALL ALAN S/M BENSON!

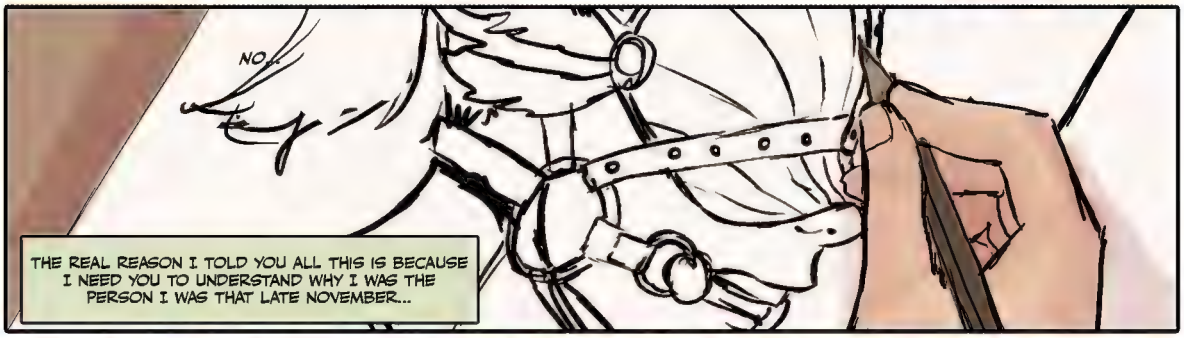

SHIT
'SCUSE ME!
WUH -- HEY!

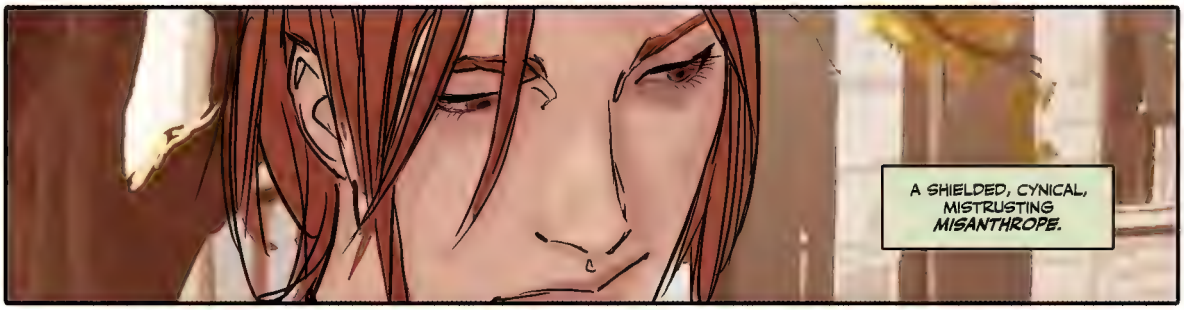
NOW, PEOPLE IN THE HALLWAYS ALL HAD DIFFERENT NAMES FOR IT...BUT YEAH --
I CALLED IT THE SKETCHBOOK INCIDENT.

ALL THE RUMORS ASIDE, THE WHOLE THING WAS PRETTY SIMPLE. I WAS DOODLING IN THE CAMPUS CAFETERIA, WHEN SARAH BENES, A CHARMING GIRL I VAGUELY KNEW, APPROACHED ME AND ASKED IF SHE COULD SEE MY DRAWINGS...
I DODGED HER REQUEST BY CLUMSILY OFFERING TO DRAW HER INSTEAD. SHE SAID YES. HONESTLY, THE WHOLE THING COULD HAVE JUST ENDED THEN AND THERE, BUT I HAD NO SUCH LUCK.
AS IT TURNED OUT, SARAH HAD A BOYFRIEND. A THIRD-YEAR STUDENT WITH A CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER AND A WIDE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS...
POINT IS, WORD GOT AROUND THAT SOME DUDE WAS COZYING UP TO HIS GIRLFRIEND.
HE AND HIS FRIENDS STOLE MY SKETCHBOOK, PROBABLY INTENDING TO BURN IT OR SOMETHING. BUT AFTER LOOKING THROUGH IT, THEY FOUND ANOTHER USE FOR ITS CONTENTS.
HENCE, THE SHITSTORM I WAS ABOUT TO FACE.
A SKETCHBOOK IS SORT OF AN ARTISTIC DIARY. AT LEAST I THOUGHT OF MINE AS ONE. AND IN THIS CASE, IT WAS A DIARY OF A YOUNG BDSM FETISHIST WITH A PASSION FOR DESIGN.
NOT A SIDE OF ME THAT I INTENDED TO, AS THEY SAY, "SHARE WITH THE CLASS." SO OTHERS DID IT FOR ME.
I UNDERSTAND THAT THIS WAS NOT YOUR DOING, BUT I INSIST ON YOU... TAKING A LEAVE OF ABSENCE. AT LEAST FOR...
THE LADY FROM THE OFFICE OF STUDENT CONDUCT REFERRED TO IT AS A "LEAVE OF ABSENCE"...BUT, YEAH, I WAS BOOTED FOR TWO WEEKS.
"TO GIVE EVERYTHING TIME TO BLOW OVER," SHE SAID. SHE MEANT WELL...


IT DIDN'T WORK.
AS IT TURNED OUT, JUST LIKE IN HIGH SCHOOL, EMBARRASSMENT HAD STAYING POWER.
TO MAKE THINGS WORSE, WHERE SIMPLE INFORMATION MIGHT FADE, DRAWINGS WERE MORE PERMANENT, AND COPY INK BOUNTIFUL...
SO IT ALL TURNED INTO A JOKE WITH A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS SERIES OF PUNCHLINES. EMPHASIS ON THE "PUNCH!"
I BECAME A MEME. AN EASY AND EFFECTIVE WAY FOR OTHERS TO DISTRACT THEMSELVES FROM THEIR OWN INSECURITIES AND FUCKUPS...
TO POINT AT AND SAY: "YEAH, I MESSED UP, BUT I'M NO S/M BENSON!"
I GUESS, IN THAT WAY I MADE A LOT OF LIVES EASIER...
THIS SHIT WENT ON FOR OVER TWO MONTHS.
NOW, I'D LOVE TO TELL YOU THAT I SIMPLY EMBRACED THE LONER LIFESTYLE.
BUT THE ROMANTICIZED NOTION OF A LONE WOLF WITH A FUCK-'EM-ALL ATTITUDE IS OFTEN JUST PRETENSE.
TRUTH IS, EXCLUSION, DERISION, LONELINESS...
CONSTANT MOCKERY...
THEY GET TO YOU.
WELL...AT THE VERY LEAST, THEY GOT TO ME.
TWO MONTHS MAY NOT SEEM THAT LONG... BUT IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER WHEN YOU'RE ON THE RECEIVING END...
LIKE I SAID — ALL OF IT GOT TO ME.
WHAT'S WITH THE ARM?
I WAS RUNNING WITH SCISSORS.
ANYHOW...

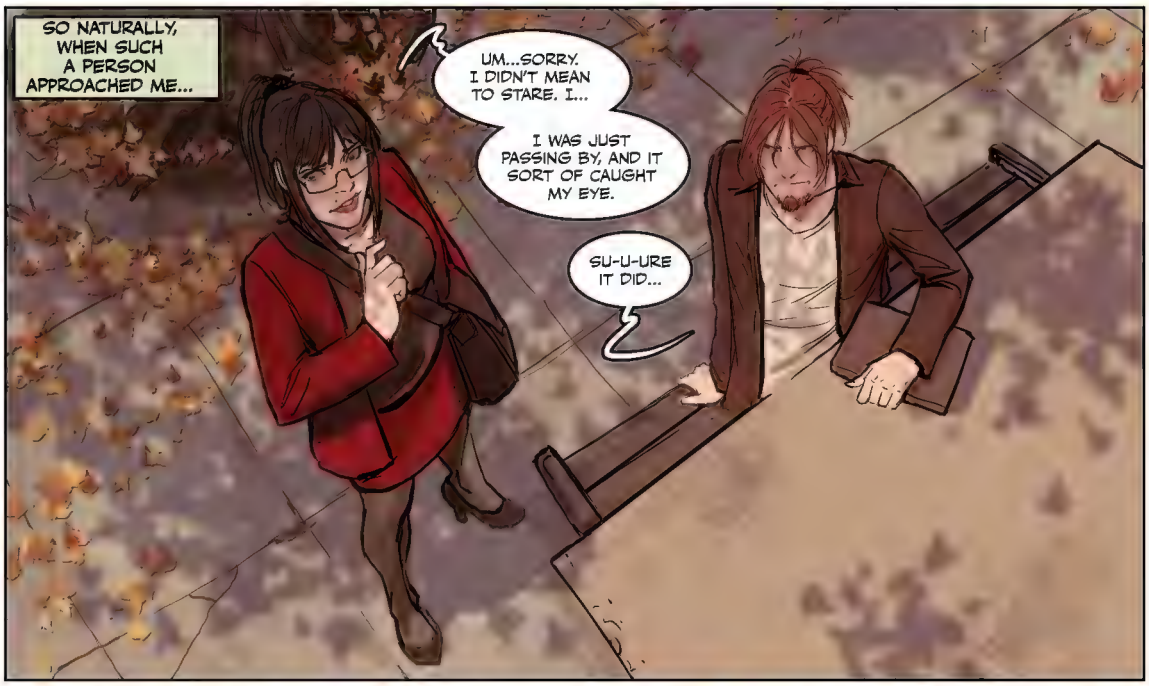
WHY AM I TELLING YOU ALL THIS?
CERTAINLY NOT FOR PITY'S SAKE...
NOR AM I TRYING TO SET UP SOME ANTAGONIST FOR MY COLLEGE YEARS. HELL, THE ORIGINAL CREW DROPPED THE JOKE SOON AFTER -- LIKE ANY MEME, IT WAS OTHERS WHO PICKED UP ON IT AND SPREAD IT.


NO.
THE REAL REASON I TOLD YOU ALL THIS IS BECAUSE I NEED YOU TO UNDERSTAND WHY I WAS THE PERSON I WAS THAT LATE NOVEMBER...

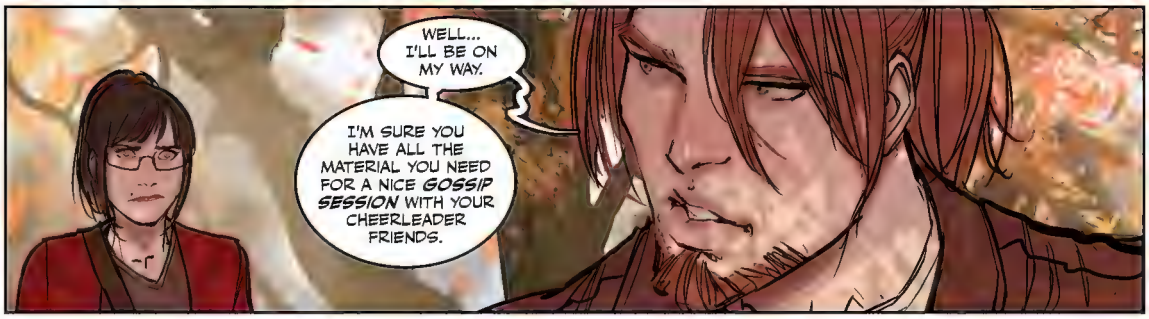

A SHIELDED, CYNICAL, MISTRUSTING MISANTHROPE.

IN HINDSIGHT, IT SEEMED IT WOULD TAKE A MIRACLE TO SNAP ME OUT OF MY GLOOM...
?

AS IT TURNED OUT, I DIDN'T NEED A MIRACLE... JUST A *KINDRED SPIRIT* -- SOMEONE WHO SPOKE MY LANGUAGE.
IS THAT A PONY-GIRL OUTFIT?

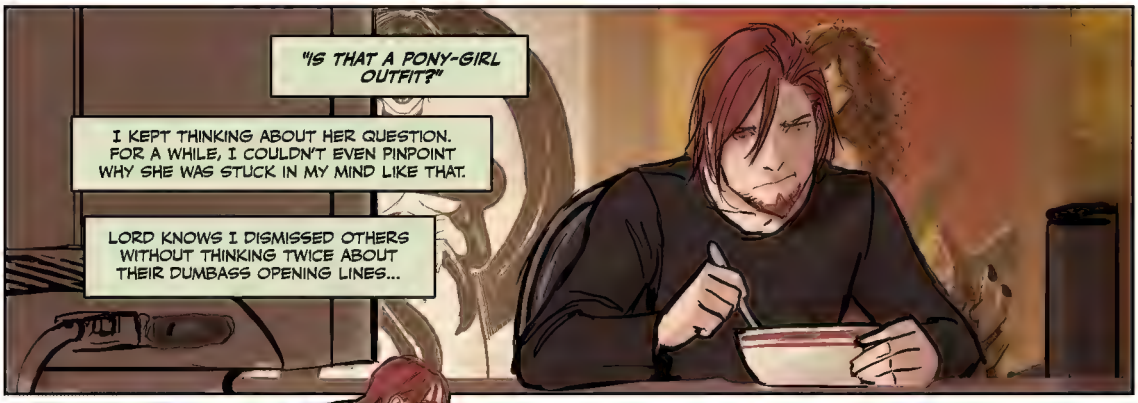

SO NATURALLY, WHEN SUCH A PERSON APPROACHED ME...
UM...SORRY. I DIDN'T MEAN TO STARE. I...
I WAS JUST PASSING BY, AND IT SORT OF CAUGHT MY EYE.
SU-U-URE IT DID...

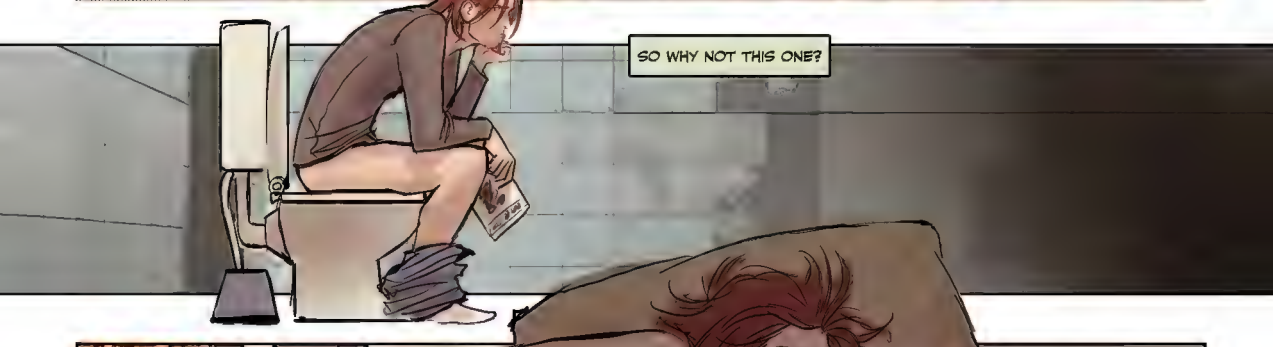
I TOTALLY BLEW HER OFF.
AND I'M ABSOLUTELY SURE YOU DON'T MAKE IT YOUR HABIT TO POKE YOUR NOSE IN OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS, EITHER.
N-NO... I MEAN.. I DON'T...
UH-HUH...

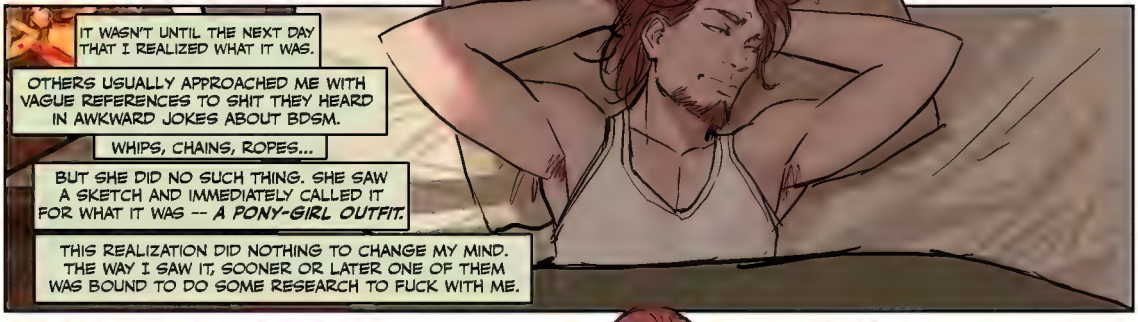

WELL... I'LL BE ON MY WAY.
I'M SURE YOU HAVE ALL THE MATERIAL YOU NEED FOR A NICE GOSSIP SESSION WITH YOUR CHEERLEADER FRIENDS.

NOW...I KNOW THAT SEEMED HARSH, BUT I HAD MY REASONS.

IN THOSE DAYS AFTER THE SKETCHBOOK INCIDENT, PRETTY MUCH THE ONLY GIRLS THAT WOULD GO NEAR ME WERE TRYING TO MESS WITH ME. USUALLY PRETENDING THEY WERE INTO THIS "BONDAGE STUFF."
THEIR APPROACH WAS VERY PREDICTABLE.
YOU'RE THAT GUY THAT'S INTO LIKE, ROPES AND LEATHER AND STUFF, RIGHT?
YOU COULD SEE THEM COMING FROM A MILE AWAY.
S/M BENSON, RIGHT? LISTEN, MY FRIEND'S SHOE-LACE BROKE. YOU GOT SOME SPARE ROPE?
KHM...
FUCK, WITH THEIR BARELY SUPPRESSED LAUGHTER, YOU DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO SEE THEM.
PFFF... KHM...HEY!
IN THE END, MY PATIENCE FOR THEIR BULLSHIT GREW THIN, AND MY SKIN THICK AND COVERED IN SPIKES.
SO, WHERE MIGHT A GIRL FIND A STURDY PAIR OF HANDCUFFS?
HAS THE GIRL TRIED HER PARENTS' SOCK DRAWER? SHOULD BE RIGHT NEXT TO THE ANAL BEADS.
I ULTIMATELY STOPPED GIVING A SHIT, AND AFTER A WHILE, THEY ALL KINDA STARTED BLENDING TOGETHER TO ME.
GUESS THAT'S WHY I'M HERE TODAY STRUGGLING TO REMEMBER HALF OF THEIR FACES.
THEN AGAIN, I WANTED THOSE PEOPLE WIPED FROM MY MEMORY.
FADE THOSE DAYS AWAY ALTOGETHER...
I MEAN, IN ALL HONESTY, EVERYTHING I TOLD YOU SO FAR IS A PATCHWORK OF STUFF I'VE TRIED TO FORGET. HELL, THAT MOMENT I ENTERED THE COLLEGE AND ALL EYES WERE ON ME? THAT WAS ABOUT A WEEK'S WORTH OF BULLSHIT SUMMARIZED INTO A SINGLE MOMENT.
NOW, THE REASON I'M TELLING YOU THIS IS... I REMEMBER EVERY SINGLE MOMENT WITH ALLY.
BUT THAT'S ALLY FOR YOU. SHE MADE LIFE WORTH REMEMBERING.
AND THE FIRST THING I REMEMBERED ABOUT HER... THE FIRST THING THAT STUCK WITH ME...

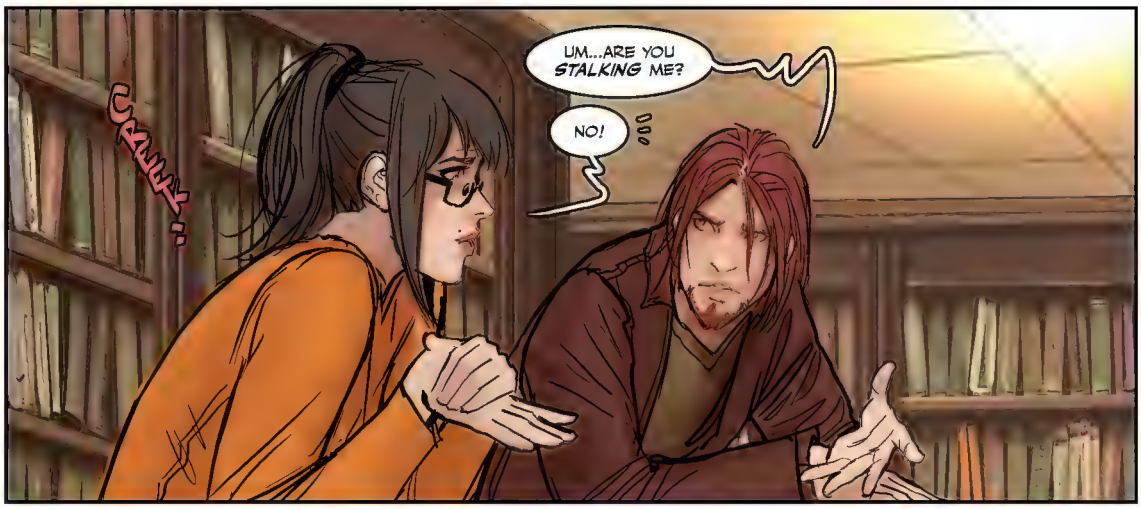

"IS THAT A PONY-GIRL OUTFIT?"
I KEPT THINKING ABOUT HER QUESTION. FOR A WHILE, I COULDN'T EVEN PINPOINT WHY SHE WAS STUCK IN MY MIND LIKE THAT.
LORD KNOWS I DISMISSED OTHERS WITHOUT THINKING TWICE ABOUT THEIR DUMBASS OPENING LINES...


SO WHY NOT THIS ONE?


IT WASN'T UNTIL THE NEXT DAY THAT I REALIZED WHAT IT WAS.
OTHERS USUALLY APPROACHED ME WITH VAGUE REFERENCES TO SHIT THEY HEARD IN AWKWARD JOKES ABOUT BDSM.
WHIPS, CHAINS, ROPES...
BUT SHE DID NO SUCH THING. SHE SAW A SKETCH AND IMMEDIATELY CALLED IT FOR WHAT IT WAS -- A PONY-GIRL OUTFIT.
THIS REALIZATION DID NOTHING TO CHANGE MY MIND. THE WAY I SAW IT, SOONER OR LATER ONE OF THEM WAS BOUND TO DO SOME RESEARCH TO FUCK WITH ME.

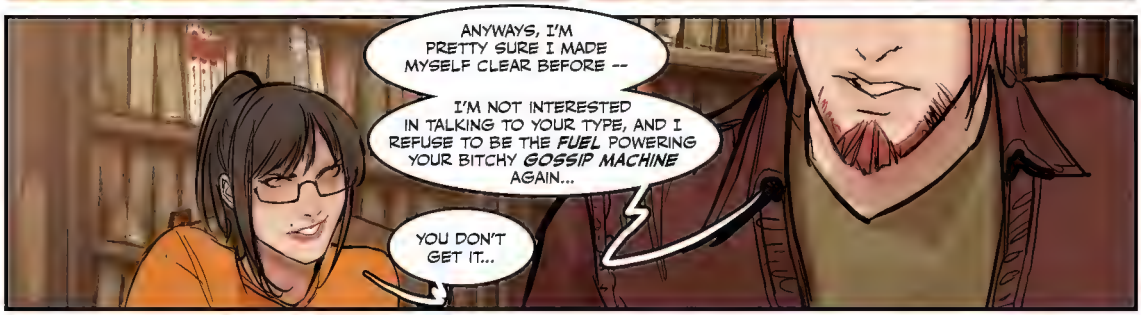
ONCE AGAIN, I HAD EVERY INTENTION OF FORGETTING THE WHOLE THING AND CARRYING ON WALLOWING IN MY PESSIMISM.

HI THERE! I THINK WE GOT OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT LAST TIME, SO TO PROPERLY INTRODUCE MYSELF, I'M ALLISON CARTER -- ALLY TO MY FRIENDS!
ALLY, HOWEVER, HAD DIFFERENT PLANS.

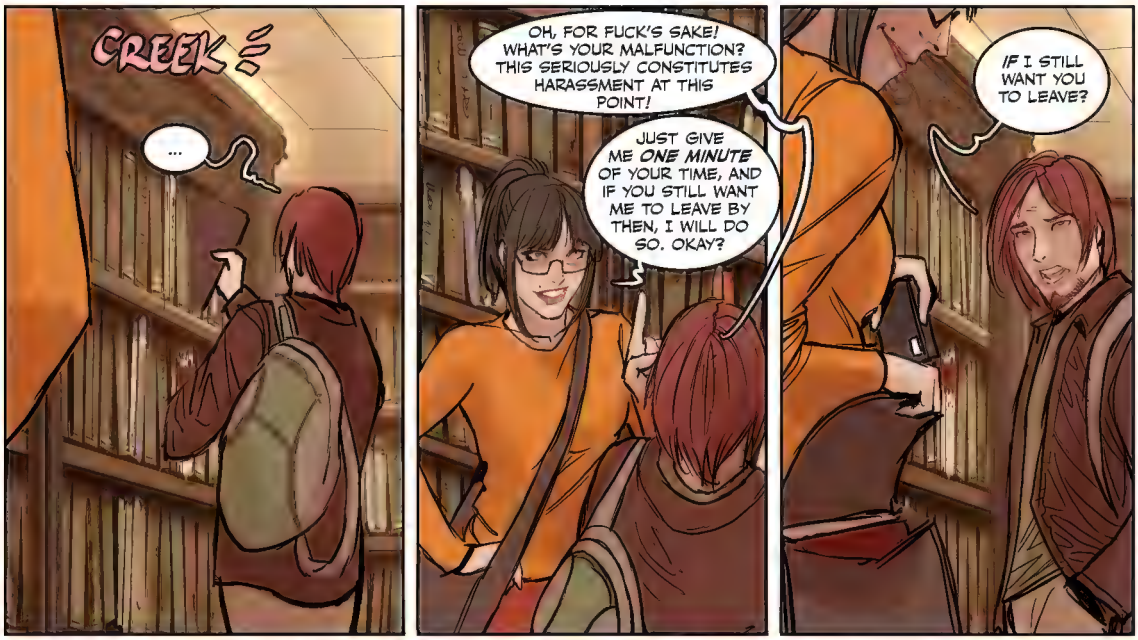

UM...ARE YOU STALKING ME?
NO!
CRUNK!

IT'S JUST THAT... WELL...I THINK WE HAVE SOME THINGS TO TALK ABOUT.
WHAT'S THAT SOUND?
CREEK

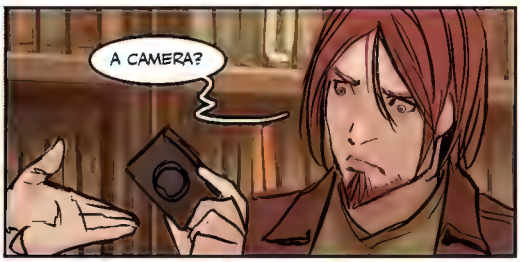
CREEK
OH...UMM, THESE CRAPPY CHAIRS ARE ALL CREAKY.
YEAH, WELL... IF YOU WEREN'T SQUIRMING SO MUCH...

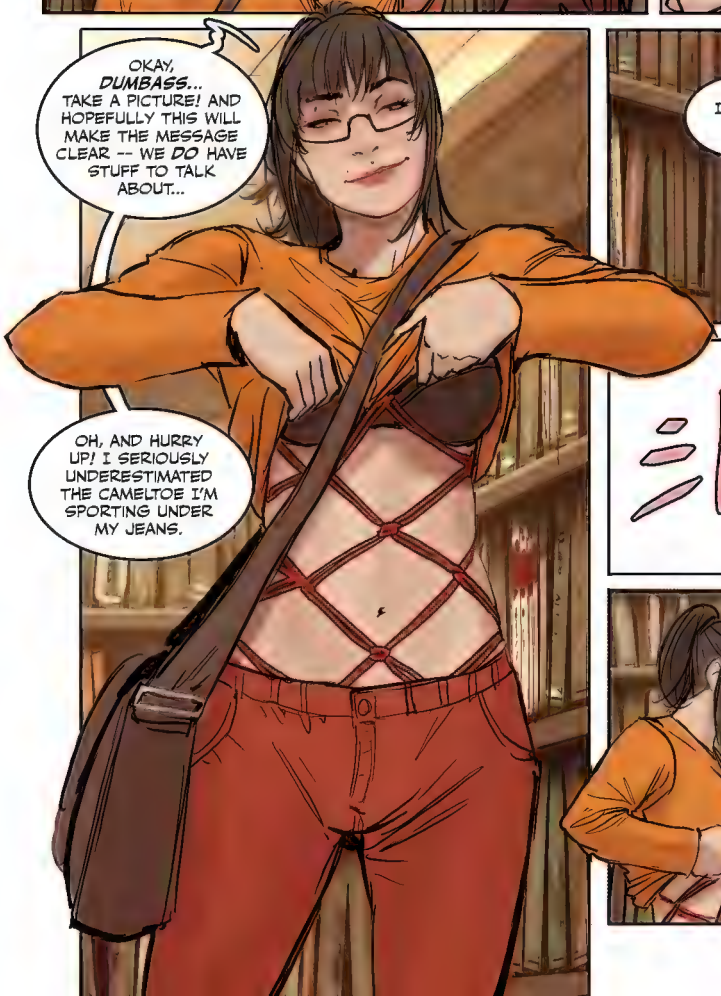

ANYWAYS, I'M PRETTY SURE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR BEFORE --
I'M NOT INTERESTED IN TALKING TO YOUR TYPE, AND I REFUSE TO BE THE FUEL POWERING YOUR BITCHY GOSSIP MACHINE AGAIN...
YOU DON'T GET IT...

NO...YOU DON'T SEEM TO GET IT. GO LOOK FOR ENTERTAINMENT SOMEWHERE ELSE, I'M FRESH OUT!
CRUNK!

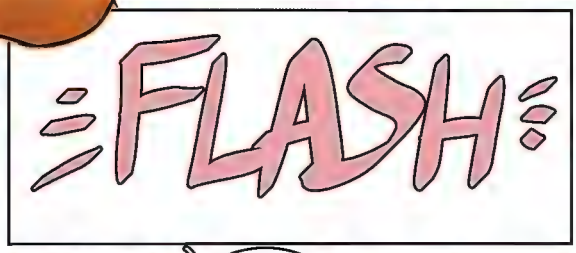

CREEK
...
OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE! WHAT'S YOUR MALFUNCTION? THIS SERIOUSLY CONSTITUTES HARASSMENT AT THIS POINT!
JUST GIVE ME ONE MINUTE OF YOUR TIME, AND IF YOU STILL WANT ME TO LEAVE BY THEN, I WILL DO SO. OKAY?
IF I STILL WANT YOU TO LEAVE?

OKAY, HERE, HOLD THIS.
HUH?


A CAMERA?


OKAY, DUMBASS... TAKE A PICTURE! AND HOPEFULLY THIS WILL MAKE THE MESSAGE CLEAR -- WE DO HAVE STUFF TO TALK ABOUT...
OH, AND HURRY UP! I SERIOUSLY UNDERESTIMATED THE CAMELTOE I'M SPORTING UNDER MY JEANS.

I...UM... WOW.

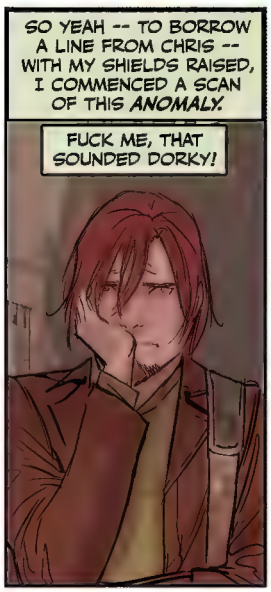

FLASH

SORRY, I... PRESSED THE BUTTON BY ACCIDENT!
SUUURE YOU DID!

NO, SERIOUSLY, THE DAMN BUTTON IS EXTRA SENSITIVE!
KHM! COMPANY!
SHHH!!! THIS IS A LIBRARY!
THE TWO OF YOU TAKE YOUR ARGUMENT SOMEWHERE ELSE!

ARGH, FINE! COME ON, WE'RE LEAVING!
I TOOK HER HAND INSTINCTIVELY, MY MIND IN FULL PANIC MODE.

TRUTH IS, I WAS STUMPED.
PEOPLE MESSING WITH ME WAS SOMETHING I WAS VERY MUCH USED TO.
BUT THIS I WAS ENTIRELY UNPREPARED FOR.
THIS GIRL...I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF HER. THE POSSIBILITY THAT SHE MIGHT BE ON THE UP AND UP WAS ENTICING, BUT MY EXPERIENCES WARNED ME AGAINST DROPPING MY GUARD.


SO YEAH -- TO BORROW A LINE FROM CHRIS -- WITH MY SHIELDS RAISED, I COMMENCED A SCAN OF THIS ANOMALY.
FUCK ME, THAT SOUNDED DORKY!

W...
UHHH... WHY, THOUGH?

HEH...

HOW ELSE WAS I GONNA GET YOU TO LISTEN?

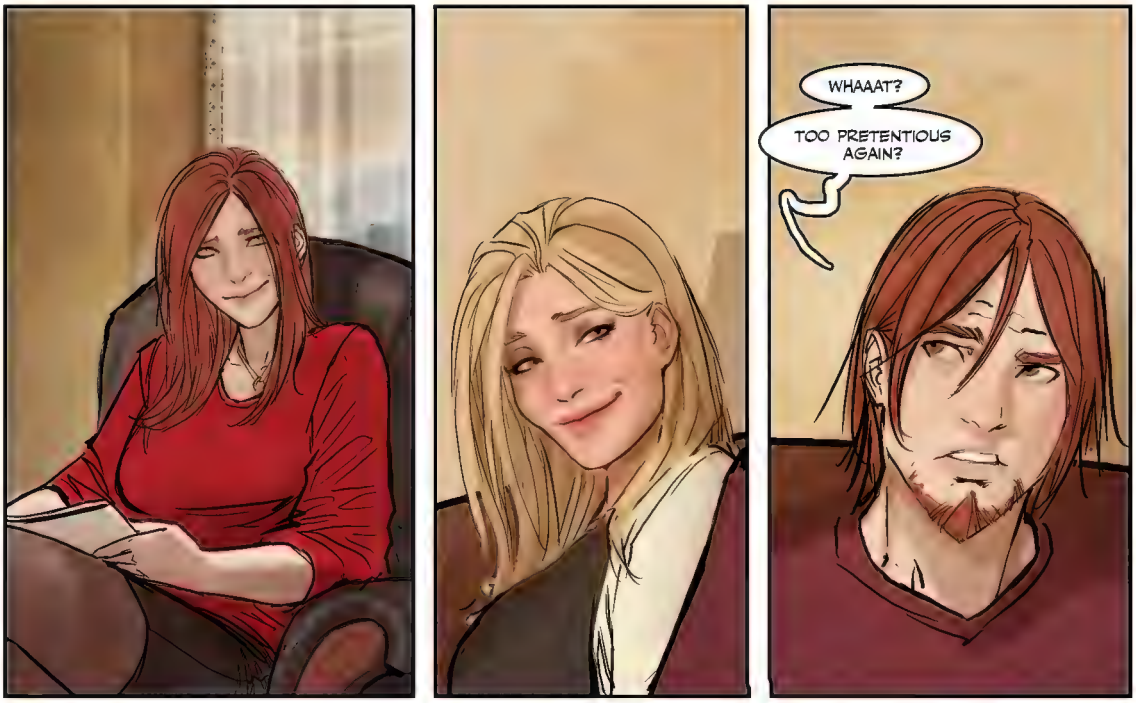
I DON'T KNOW? TALK...?
YEAH...UH, FAIR ENOUGH...I WASN'T MUCH OF A TALKER THE LAST TIME YOU TRIED...I MEAN, I HAD MY REASONS.
I KNOW. I HEARD THINGS...
I KINDA FIGURED YOU WERE PROBABLY GONNA GIVE ME THE COLD SHOULDER AGAIN IF I JUST TRIED TALKING TO YOU...
HENCE THE... "SHOW DON'T TELL" APPROACH.
I REMEMBER A ROGUE SMILE.
AN HONEST SMILE THAT ESCAPED MY BITTERNESS AS I WONDERED: COULD SHE BE FOR REAL?
SO...DID YOU DO THAT ON YOUR OWN? YOU KNOW, THE ROPE STUFF?
YUP! THIS ROPE, A PRINTED OUT TUTORIAL, AND I HAD AN HOUR-LONG DATE IN THE BATHROOM.
CONSEQUENTLY, MY MOM NOW THINKS I'M HEAVILY CONSTIPATED... SO THERE'S THAT.
HEH...
WELL...UM... CONSTIPATION ASIDE...
NICELY DONE!
WHY, THANK YOU!
BUT UHH, I STILL DON'T GET IT...
GET WHAT?
WHY GO THIS FAR JUST TO TALK TO ME?
REALLY?
DIDN'T YOU EVER WISH YOU HAD SOME FRIENDS YOU COULD TALK ABOUT THIS STUFF WITH?

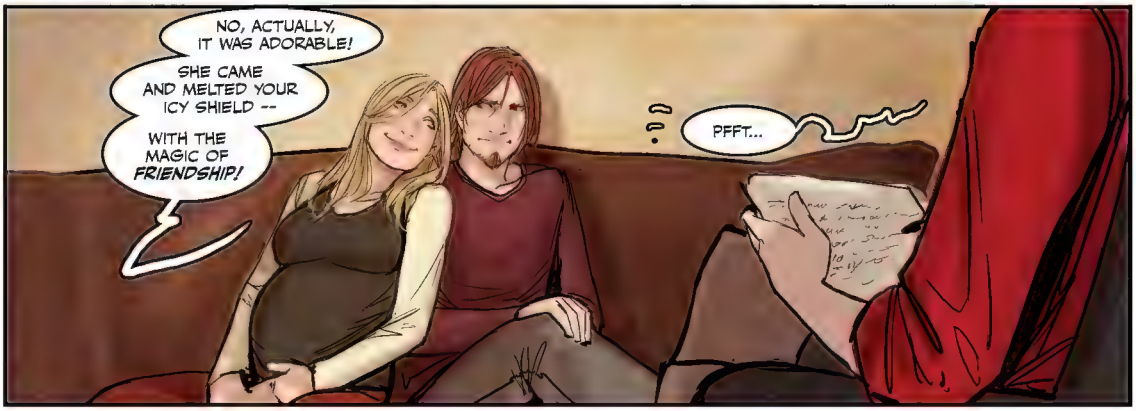
NOW, THOSE SHIELDS I MENTIONED RAISING...THEY WERE A TRUSTY BARRICADE MADE OF 100% PURE, COLD CYNICISM.
FOR MONTHS, THAT WAS MY LAST LINE OF DEFENSE --
IT KEPT THE ASSHOLES AT BAY.
THEY ONLY HAD THEIR FUN IF YOU LET THEM GET TO YOU.
OH, DON'T GET ME WRONG -- THEIR VERBAL BLOWS STILL STUNG ME, BUT MY SHIELD MADE IT SEEM LIKE I HAD NO FUCKS LEFT TO GIVE, SO THEY LOST THEIR INTEREST MUCH SOONER.
THIS BARRICADE OF MISANTHROPY HELD STRONG FOR A LONG TIME AND THEN...THERE SHE WAS.
KNOCKING ON THE PREVIOUSLY IMPENETRABLE WALL, TURNING IT TO GLASS.
I COULD FEEL THE CRACKS SPREADING.
I FELT...VULNERABLE.
DESPERATELY, I HELD UP MY SHIELD ONE LAST TIME.
I CAN'T IMAGINE YOU HAVE PROBLEMS FINDING FRIENDS...
I DON'T... I MEAN... "FRIENDS" IS A STRONG WORD...
NONE OF THEM REALLY KNOW ME. THEY KNOW "COLLEGE ALLY."
COLLEGE ALLY LISTENS TO THEIR PROBLEMS, LAUGHS AT THEIR JOKES AND SHIES AWAY FROM SEX TALK BECAUSE SHE MIGHT SPILL OUT A LITTLE TOO MUCH, AND FREAK EVERYONE OUT.
I GUESS I REALLY WANTED SOMEONE IN MY LIFE WHO I COULD TALK TO ABOUT THE OTHER STUFF.
STUFF THAT COLLEGE ALLY KEEPS HIDDEN.
I DON'T KNOW...A FRIEND WHO I COULD BE MYSELF WITH, IN A WAY I CAN'T BE AROUND EVERYONE ELSE.

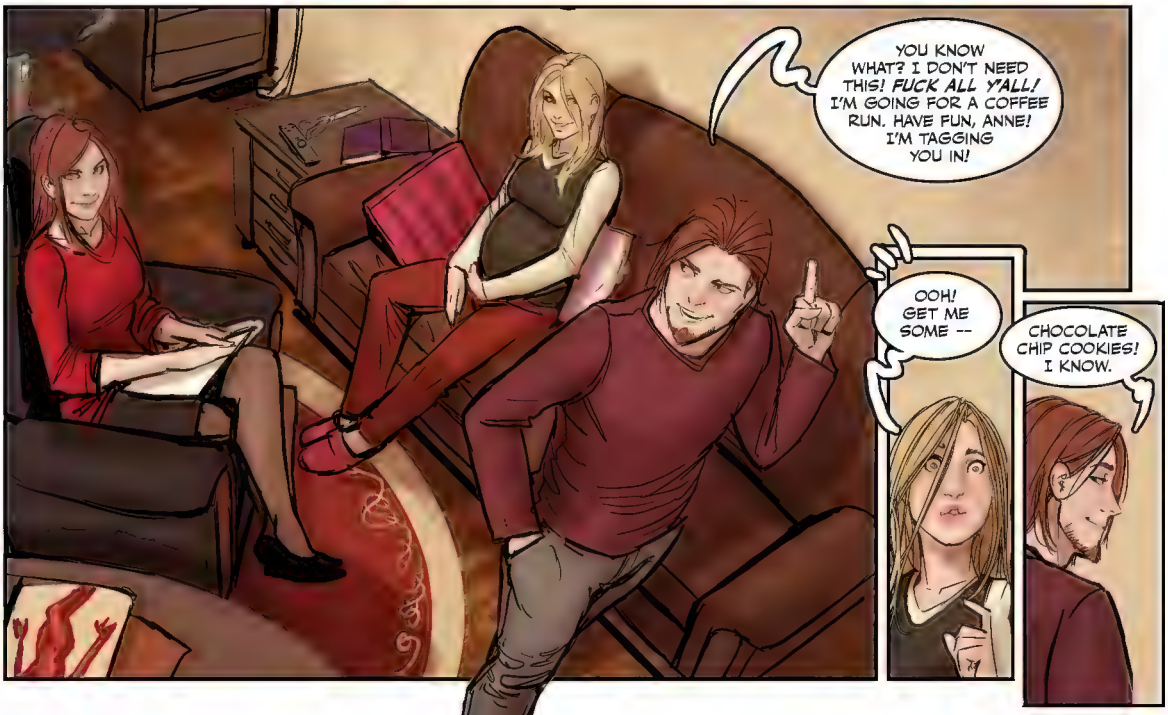
AND YOU DECIDED I WAS THAT PERSON FROM SEEING JUST ONE DRAWING...
YEAH...I MEAN, THAT GOT ME STARTED...
UH, ALL CARDS ON THE TABLE...I MADE SOME EFFORTS TO FIND COPIES OF SOME OF THE PIECES THEY KEEP POSTING...
A BUNCH OF THE PIECES...
LIKE... MOST OF THEM.
YOU'RE LEGIT.
...
ALSO, SORRY.
CREEK
CREEK
AND THERE IT WAS.
WITH THE CREAK OF A ROPE AND SOME HOWLING LAUGHTER, THE LAST OF MY DEFENSES LAY BROKEN.
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A WHILE, I REALIZED... HERE WAS SOMEONE I COULD TRUST.
AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS, I FELT LIKE MYSELF ONCE AGAIN.
PFFFT!!!
BWAHA HAHAHAH!
OH, GOD... HEH! THIS IS AWKWARD AS FUCK. ALLY, YOU WANNA GET SOME COFFEE OR SOMETHING?
OH HELL YES!
PREFERABLY SOMEPLACE WITH A DECENT BATHROOM...I REALLY GOTTA GET RID OF THIS ROPE ASAP... IT'S, UM...I DID A GOOD JOB...
A REAL GOOD JOB!

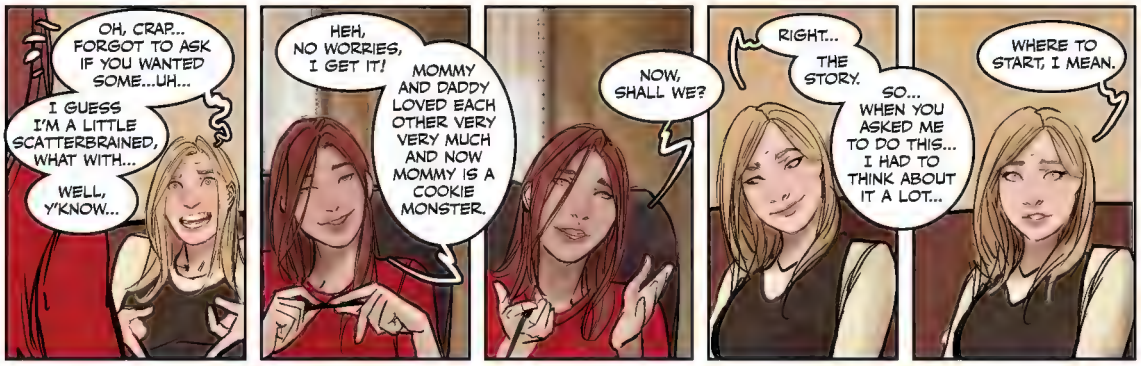
WAIT...YOU DIDN'T LIKE, MAKE THOSE, YOU KNOW, KNOTS?
THE...UM... STIMULATING ONES?
...NOPE...
UH-HUH...SO, DOES HUNCHING LIKE THAT MAKE IT BETTER?
UH... A LITTLE?
PFFFT....
OH, SHUT THE FUCK UP! I DID THIS FROM A TUTORIAL AND IT WAS FINE UNTIL I WAS OUTSIDE THE BATHROOM.
COULDN'T JUST GO, "HEY MOM, I KNOW I WAS JUST TAKING AN HOUR-LONG SHIT, BUT GUESS WHAT? SECONDS!"
FINE, FINE! LET'S GO FIND YOU A DECENT BATHROOM...
OH! ALSO, YOU GOT LIKE, A PAIR OF SCISSORS OR SOMETHING? I KINDA RUSHED OUT AND FORGOT MINE.
NO. I DO HAVE A BOX CUTTER?
THAT'LL DO!
OH, ALSO, HERE'S YOUR CAMERA BACK!

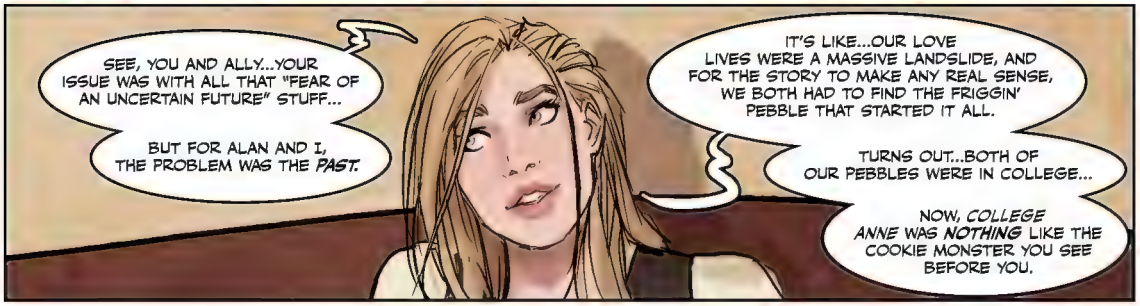
I MEANT FOR YOU TO KEEP THE PHOTO, YOU KNOW... SO YOU KNOW I'M NOT HERE TO MESS WITH YOU.
NAH. YOU'RE FOR REAL, ALLY.
SO...CAN I SEE YOUR SKETCHBOOK?
NOT ON THE FIRST DATE -- I'M NOT THAT KIND OF LADY!
AND SO, WITH THE SHATTERING OF THE LAST REMNANTS OF MY SHIELD, A NEW ERA OF MY LIFE BEGAN.
AN AGE I DIDN'T WANT TO FORGET.
A TIME WORTH REMEMBERING.


WHAAAT?
TOO PRETENTIOUS AGAIN?


NO, ACTUALLY, IT WAS ADORABLE!
SHE CAME AND MELTED YOUR ICY SHIELD --
WITH THE MAGIC OF *FRIENDSHIP!*
PFFT...

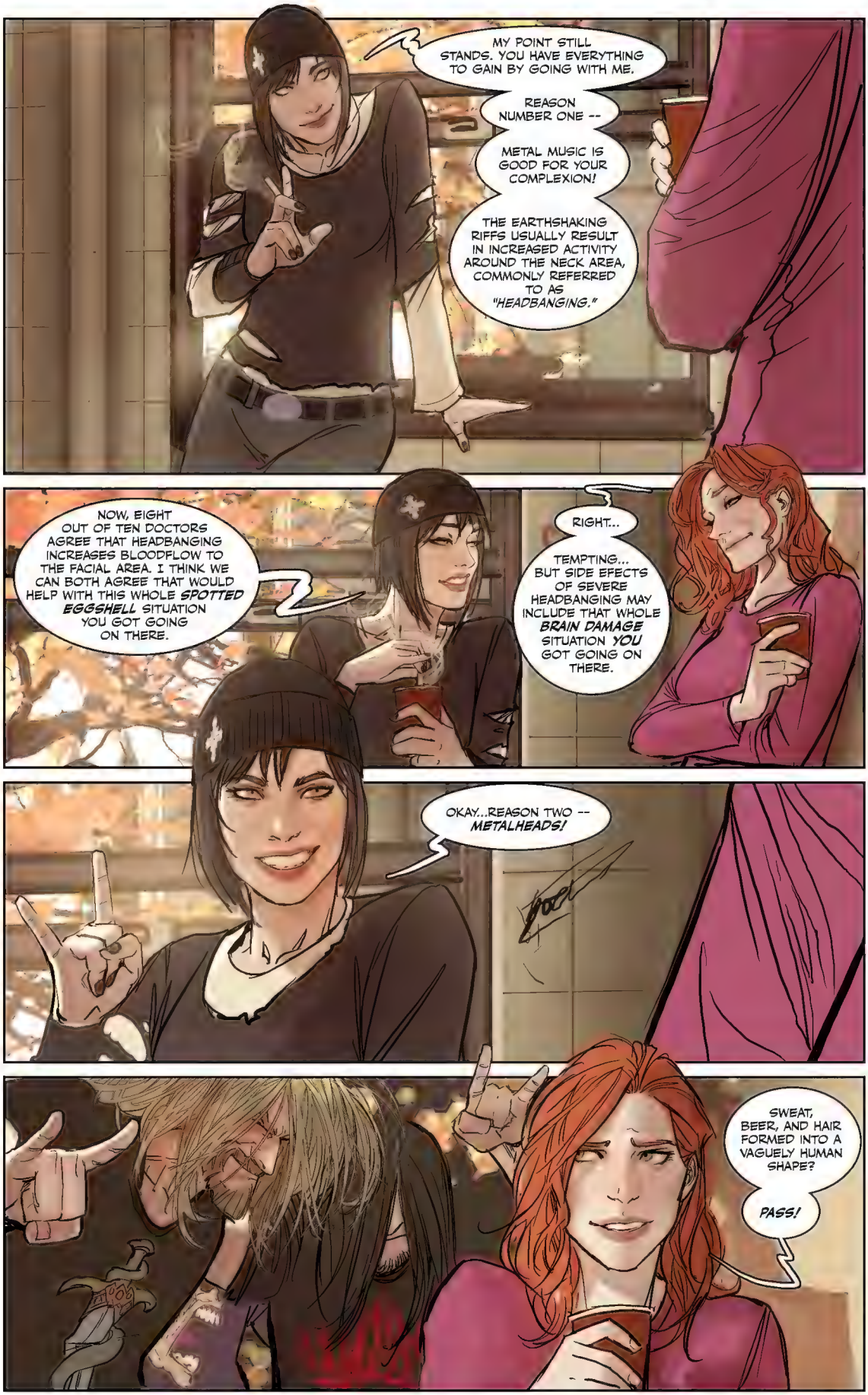

YOU KNOW WHAT? I DON'T NEED THIS! *FUCK ALL Y'ALL!* I'M GOING FOR A COFFEE RUN. HAVE FUN, ANNE! I'M TAGGING YOU IN!
OOH! GET ME SOME --
CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES! I KNOW.

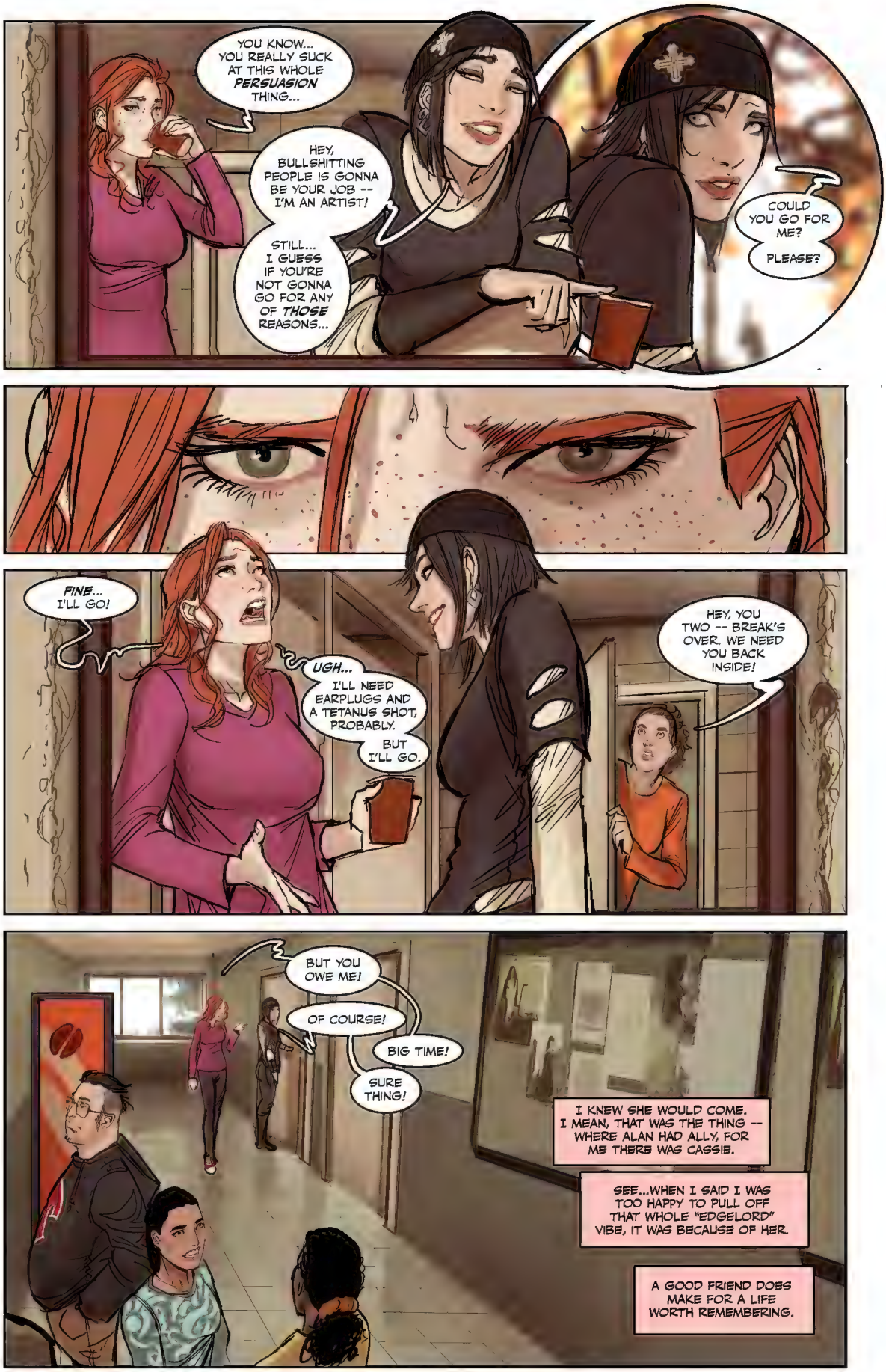

OH, CRAP... FORGOT TO ASK IF YOU WANTED SOME...UH...
I GUESS I'M A LITTLE SCATTERBRAINED, WHAT WITH...
WELL, Y'KNOW...
HEH, NO WORRIES, I GET IT!
MOMMY AND DADDY LOVED EACH OTHER VERY VERY MUCH AND NOW MOMMY IS A COOKIE MONSTER.
NOW, SHALL WE?
RIGHT...
THE STORY.
SO... WHEN YOU ASKED ME TO DO THIS... I HAD TO THINK ABOUT IT A LOT...
WHERE TO START, I MEAN.


SEE, YOU AND ALLY...YOUR ISSUE WAS WITH ALL THAT "FEAR OF AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE" STUFF...
BUT FOR ALAN AND I, THE PROBLEM WAS THE *PAST.*
IT'S LIKE...OUR LOVE LIVES WERE A MASSIVE LANDSLIDE, AND FOR THE STORY TO MAKE ANY REAL SENSE, WE BOTH HAD TO FIND THE FRIGGIN' PEBBLE THAT STARTED IT ALL.
TURNS OUT...BOTH OF OUR PEBBLES WERE IN COLLEGE...
NOW, *COLLEGE ANNE* WAS ***NOTHING*** LIKE THE COOKIE MONSTER YOU SEE BEFORE YOU.

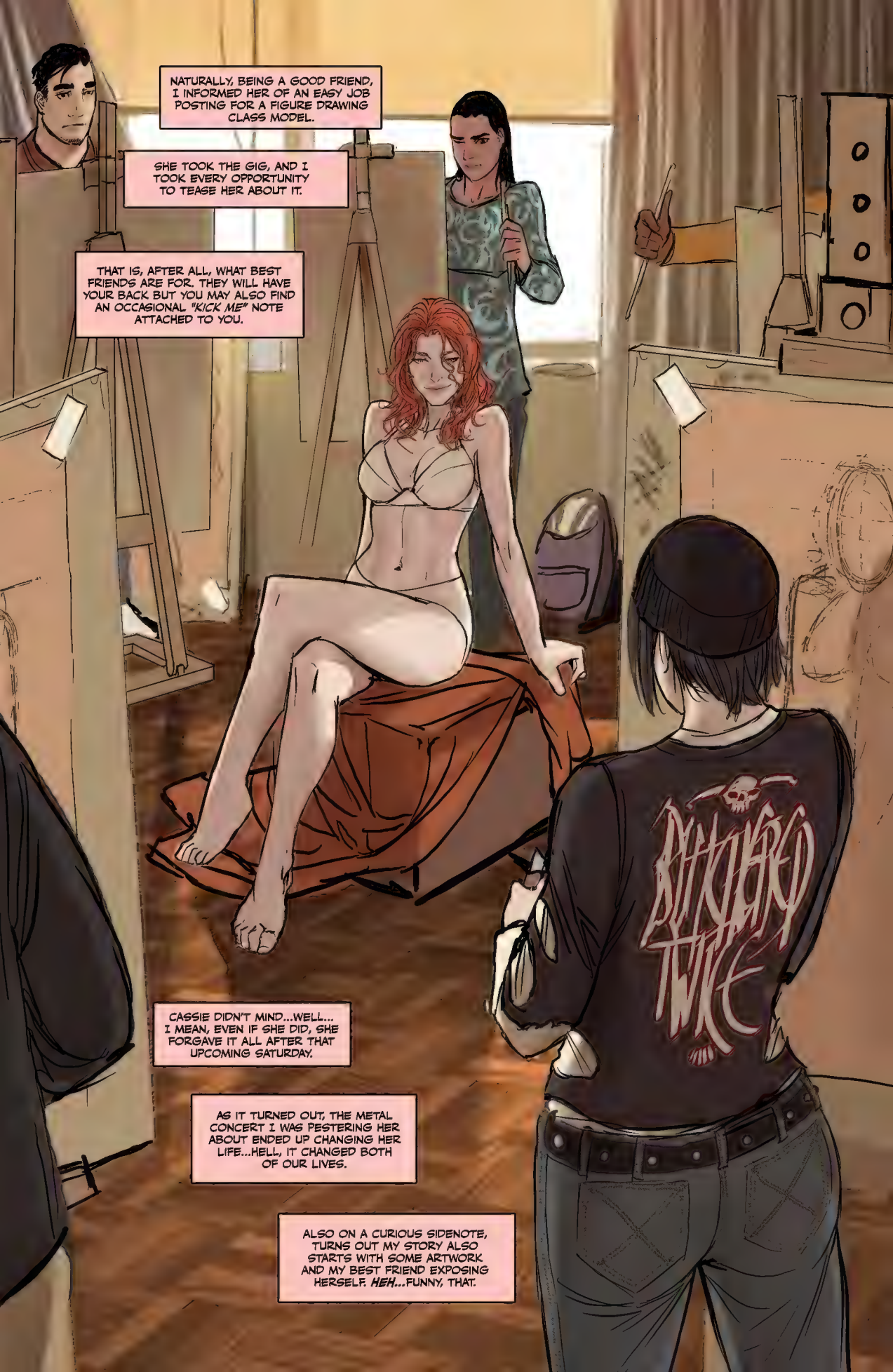
OH, NO! *COLLEGE ANNE* WAS A LITTLE GOTH, A LITTLE PUNK, AND A WHOLE LOTTA METAL.
AND YET, DESPITE MY APPEARANCE, I LACKED THE BROODING PERSONALITY OF A ***TRUE EDGELORD.***
TRUTH IS, I WAS ***HAPPY.***
OH, COME ON!

I WENT WITH YOU TO THAT ***MUSICAL!***
TECHNICALLY, YOU OWE ME!
"TECHNICALLY," IT WAS YOUR BIRTHDAY GIFT TO ME!
THE ANSWER IS NO!
I AM NOT GOING TO SOME ***METAL*** FESTIVAL!

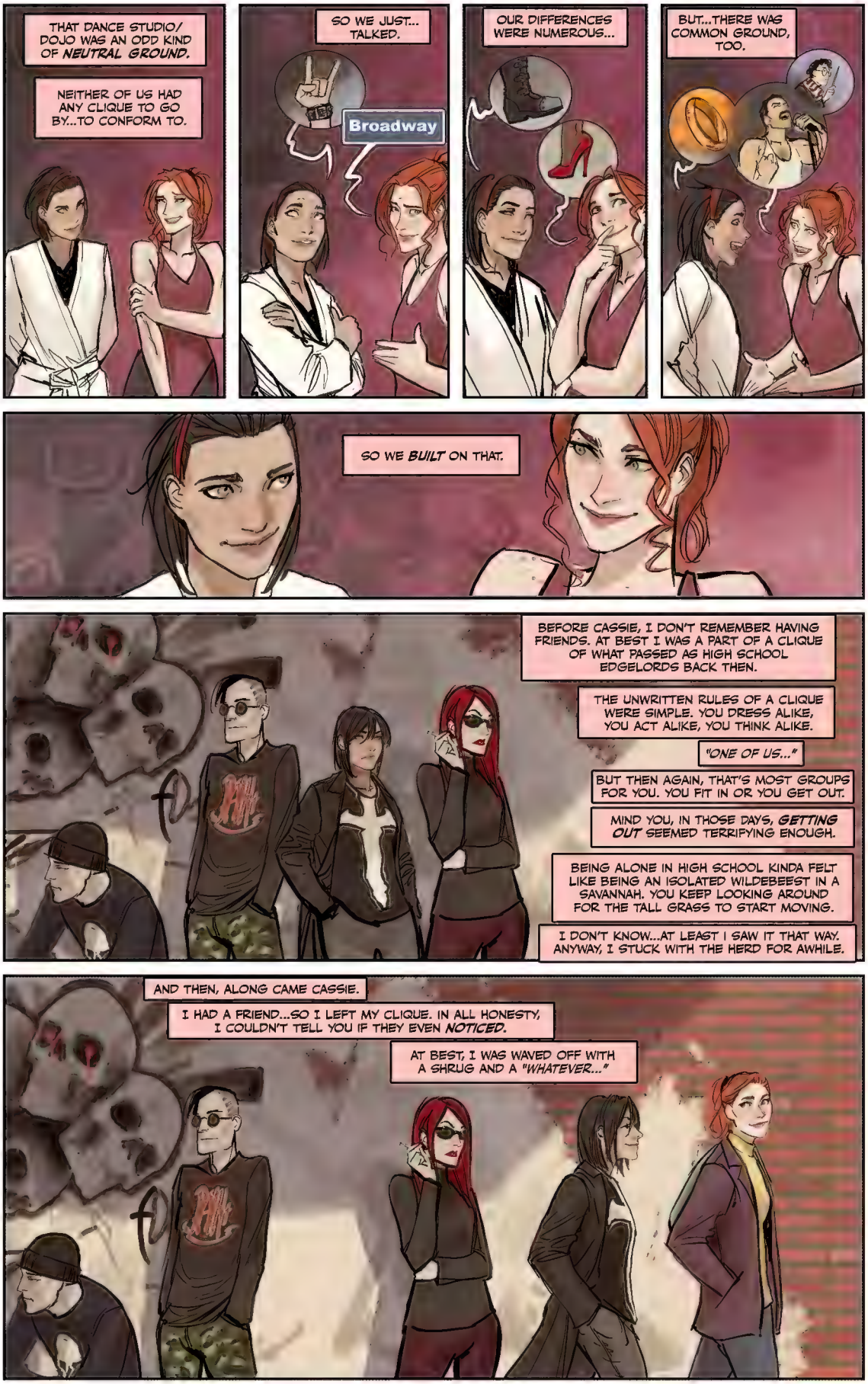

MY POINT STILL STANDS. YOU HAVE EVERYTHING TO GAIN BY GOING WITH ME.
REASON NUMBER ONE --
METAL MUSIC IS GOOD FOR YOUR COMPLEXION!
THE EARTHSHAKING RIFFS USUALLY RESULT IN INCREASED ACTIVITY AROUND THE NECK AREA, COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS "HEADBANGING."
NOW, EIGHT OUT OF TEN DOCTORS AGREE THAT HEADBANGING INCREASES BLOODFLOW TO THE FACIAL AREA. I THINK WE CAN BOTH AGREE THAT WOULD HELP WITH THIS WHOLE SPOTTED EGGSHELL SITUATION YOU GOT GOING ON THERE.
RIGHT...
TEMPTING... BUT SIDE EFECTS OF SEVERE HEADBANGING MAY INCLUDE THAT WHOLE BRAIN DAMAGE SITUATION YOU GOT GOING ON THERE.
OKAY...REASON TWO -- METALHEADS!
SWEAT, BEER, AND HAIR FORMED INTO A VAGUELY HUMAN SHAPE?
PASS!

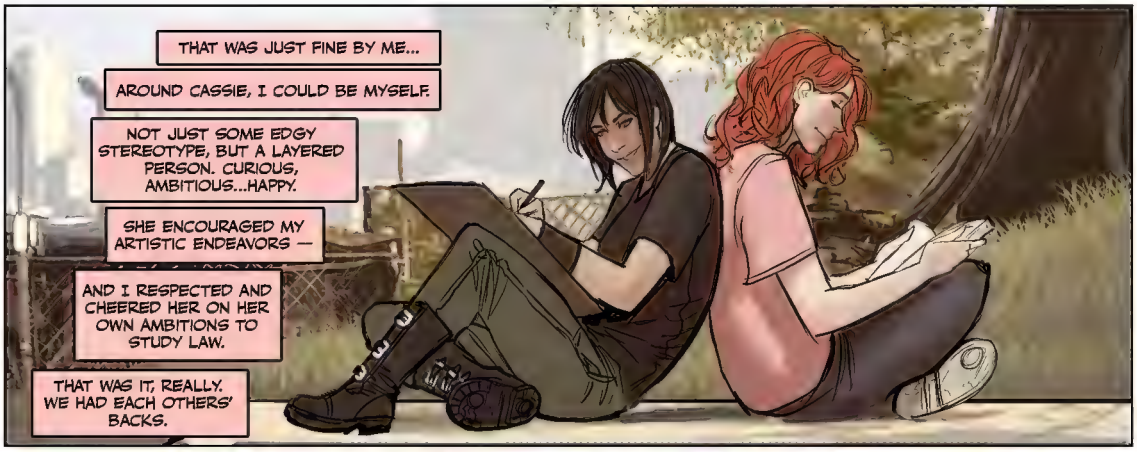

YOU KNOW... YOU REALLY SUCK AT THIS WHOLE PERSUASION THING...
HEY, BULLSHITTING PEOPLE IS GONNA BE YOUR JOB -- I'M AN ARTIST!
STILL... I GUESS IF YOU'RE NOT GONNA GO FOR ANY OF THOSE REASONS...
COULD YOU GO FOR ME?
PLEASE?
FINE... I'LL GO!
UGH... I'LL NEED EARPLUGS AND A TETANUS SHOT, PROBABLY.
BUT I'LL GO.
HEY, YOU TWO -- BREAK'S OVER. WE NEED YOU BACK INSIDE!
BUT YOU OWE ME!
OF COURSE!
BIG TIME!
SURE THING!
I KNEW SHE WOULD COME. I MEAN, THAT WAS THE THING -- WHERE ALAN HAD ALLY, FOR ME THERE WAS CASSIE.
SEE...WHEN I SAID I WAS TOO HAPPY TO PULL OFF THAT WHOLE "EDGELORD" VIBE, IT WAS BECAUSE OF HER.
A GOOD FRIEND DOES MAKE FOR A LIFE WORTH REMEMBERING.

THIS WHOLE GROWLING, HEADBANGING THING OF YOURS IS SO NOT ME.
HEY, I'M JUST HOPING YOU MIGHT END UP LIKING IT SOMEDAY...
BUT I KNOW YOU WELL ENOUGH NOT TO HOLD MY BREATH OVER IT.
GOOD.
AND YOU KNOW WHAT? THAT'S JUST FINE! YOU WERE NEVER THE HARDCORE TYPE.
WELL...I WOULDN'T...
IN FACT, IF I HAD TO SUMMARIZE YOU, I'D SAY YOU'RE JUST A SMALL TOWN GIRL WITH BIG CITY DREAMS, STRIPPING HER WAY THROUGH COLLEGE!
HEY, I'M NOT...
CASSANDRA, YOU READY?
ARGH!
YES!
BY THE WAY, I'M OUT OF ONES. I'M SURE YOU CAN BREAK A FIVE?
FUCK YOU, ANNE!
CASSIE CONNELLY.
MY BEST FRIEND.
KIND, LOYAL, FUN... AND VERY HARD WORKING.
AND I MEAN IT WHEN I SAY HARD-WORKING! LAW SCHOOL WAS EXPENSIVE AS FUCK. HER STUDENT LOANS BARELY COVERED THE TUITION. SO CASSIE WOULD PICK UP ANY PART-TIME JOB SHE COULD GET.

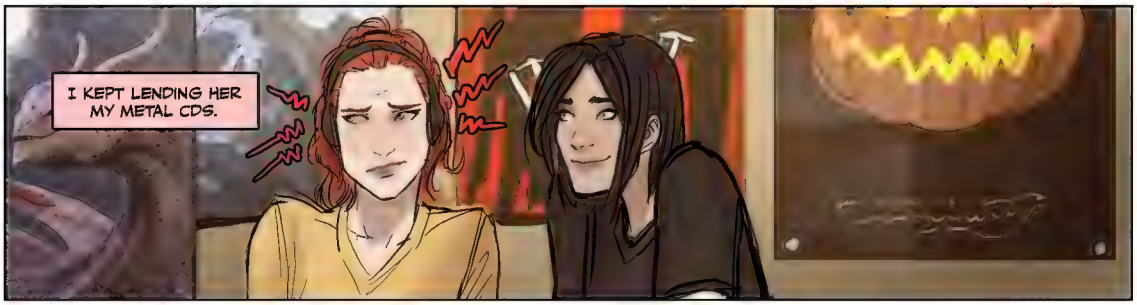

NATURALLY, BEING A GOOD FRIEND, I INFORMED HER OF AN EASY JOB POSTING FOR A FIGURE DRAWING CLASS MODEL.
SHE TOOK THE GIG, AND I TOOK EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO TEASE HER ABOUT IT.
THAT IS, AFTER ALL, WHAT BEST FRIENDS ARE FOR. THEY WILL HAVE YOUR BACK BUT YOU MAY ALSO FIND AN OCCASIONAL "KICK ME" NOTE ATTACHED TO YOU.
CASSIE DIDN'T MIND...WELL... I MEAN, EVEN IF SHE DID, SHE FORGAVE IT ALL AFTER THAT UPCOMING SATURDAY.
AS IT TURNED OUT, THE METAL CONCERT I WAS PESTERING HER ABOUT ENDED UP CHANGING HER LIFE...HELL, IT CHANGED BOTH OF OUR LIVES.
ALSO ON A CURIOUS SIDENOTE, TURNS OUT MY STORY ALSO STARTS WITH SOME ARTWORK AND MY BEST FRIEND EXPOSING HERSELF. HEH...FUNNY, THAT.

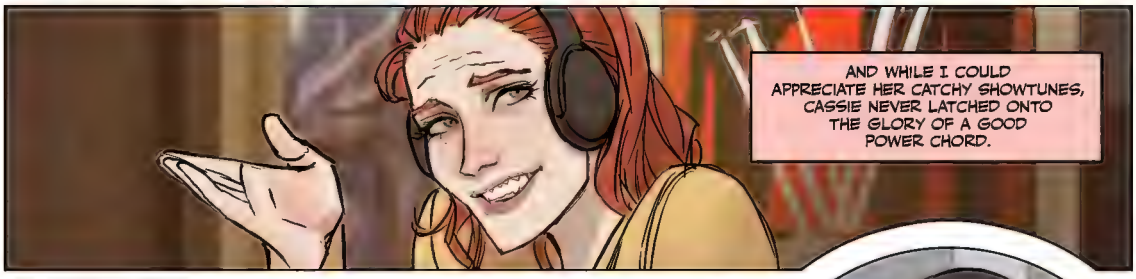
ANYHOW...THIS FRIENDSHIP THAT CASSIE AND I SHARED.
IT WAS AN UNLIKELY ONE FROM THE GET-GO.
UNLIKE ALLY AND ALAN, WE HAD LITTLE TO NOTHING IN COMMON.
SHE WAS A HARD WORKING STUDENT WITH HER EYES ON THE PRIZE.
I WAS A HIGH SCHOOL EDGELORD -- FLUENT IN THE LANGUAGES OF CYNICISM, SARCASM, AND 3 DIFFERENT DIALECTS OF EYEROLLS.
OF THE TWO OF US, CASSIE WAS THE HONEST ONE.
SHE WORE HER PERSONALITY ON HER SLEEVE.
ME? I WAS MORE LIKE A REVERSE ALLY. ALLY HID HER EDGY SIDE. I ARMORED MYSELF IN MINE.
I KEPT THE TENDER MUSHINESS ON THE INSIDE WELL HIDDEN.
I WAS A GOTH LOBSTER IS WHAT I'M SAYING.
NOW, BELOW THAT DARK CRUSTACEAN SURFACE, THERE WAS A CURIOUS KID CONSTANTLY SEARCHING FOR HERSELF...
...TRYING OUT ALL SORTS OF STUFF, BOTH GOOD AND BAD...
...BURNING THROUGH HOBBIES ON WHAT SEEMED LIKE A WEEKLY BASIS.
IN FACT, TO THIS DAY, I COULDN'T TELL YOU WITH CERTAINTY IF I FIRST MET CASSIE DURING MY WEEK OF TRYING MARTIAL ARTS OR DANCING. BUT I MET HER DURING ONE OF THOSE.
OH...HEY... UH...WE GO TO SAME HIGH SCHOOL, DON'T WE?


THAT DANCE STUDIO/ DOJO WAS AN ODD KIND OF NEUTRAL GROUND.
NEITHER OF US HAD ANY CLIQUE TO GO BY...TO CONFORM TO.
SO WE JUST... TALKED.
Broadway
OUR DIFFERENCES WERE NUMEROUS...
BUT...THERE WAS COMMON GROUND, TOO.
SO WE BUILT ON THAT.
BEFORE CASSIE, I DON'T REMEMBER HAVING FRIENDS. AT BEST I WAS A PART OF A CLIQUE OF WHAT PASSED AS HIGH SCHOOL EDGELORDS BACK THEN.
THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF A CLIQUE WERE SIMPLE. YOU DRESS ALIKE, YOU ACT ALIKE, YOU THINK ALIKE.
"ONE OF US..."
BUT THEN AGAIN, THAT'S MOST GROUPS FOR YOU. YOU FIT IN OR YOU GET OUT.
MIND YOU, IN THOSE DAYS, GETTING OUT SEEMED TERRIFYING ENOUGH.
BEING ALONE IN HIGH SCHOOL KINDA FELT LIKE BEING AN ISOLATED WILDEBEEST IN A SAVANNAH. YOU KEEP LOOKING AROUND FOR THE TALL GRASS TO START MOVING.
I DON'T KNOW...AT LEAST I SAW IT THAT WAY. ANYWAY, I STUCK WITH THE HERD FOR AWHILE.
AND THEN, ALONG CAME CASSIE.
I HAD A FRIEND...SO I LEFT MY CLIQUE. IN ALL HONESTY, I COULDN'T TELL YOU IF THEY EVEN NOTICED.
AT BEST, I WAS WAVED OFF WITH A SHRUG AND A "WHATEVER..."

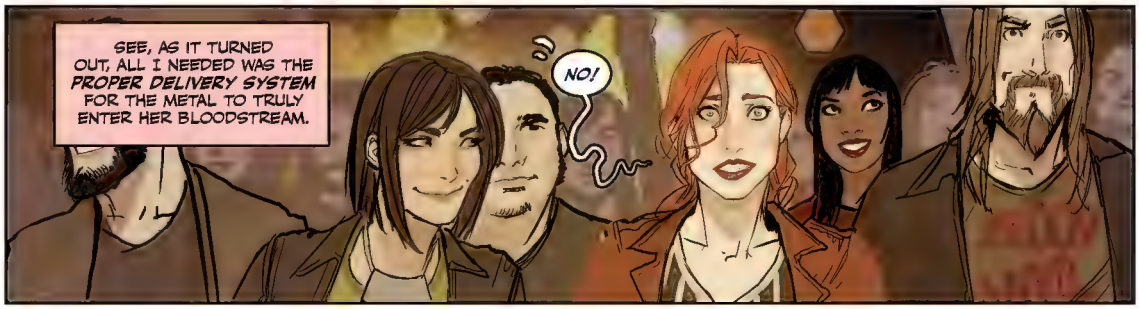

THAT WAS JUST FINE BY ME...
AROUND CASSIE, I COULD BE MYSELF.
NOT JUST SOME EDGY STEREOTYPE, BUT A LAYERED PERSON. CURIOUS, AMBITIOUS...HAPPY.
SHE ENCOURAGED MY ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS —
AND I RESPECTED AND CHEERED HER ON HER OWN AMBITIONS TO STUDY LAW.
THAT WAS IT, REALLY. WE HAD EACH OTHERS' BACKS.

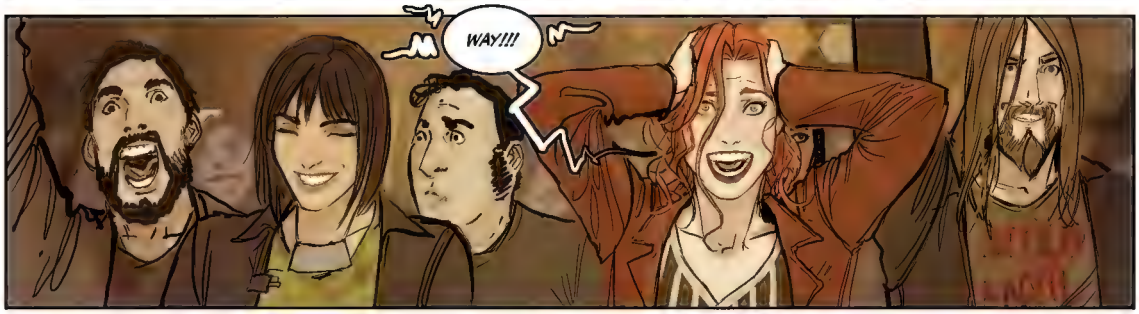
AND EVENTUALLY, AS BEST FRIENDS DO, WE WOULD TRY GETTING EACH OTHER TO CROSS SOME OF THE BRIDGES LEFT UNCROSSED.
SHE TRIED RELENTLESSLY TO GET ME TO SHARE HER LOVE OF MUSICALS.


I KEPT LENDING HER MY METAL CDS.


AND WHILE I COULD APPRECIATE HER CATCHY SHOWTUNES, CASSIE NEVER LATCHED ONTO THE GLORY OF A GOOD POWER CHORD.

IT WASN'T UNTIL COLLEGE THAT AN OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED ITSELF FOR ME TO *TRULY* REACH HER.





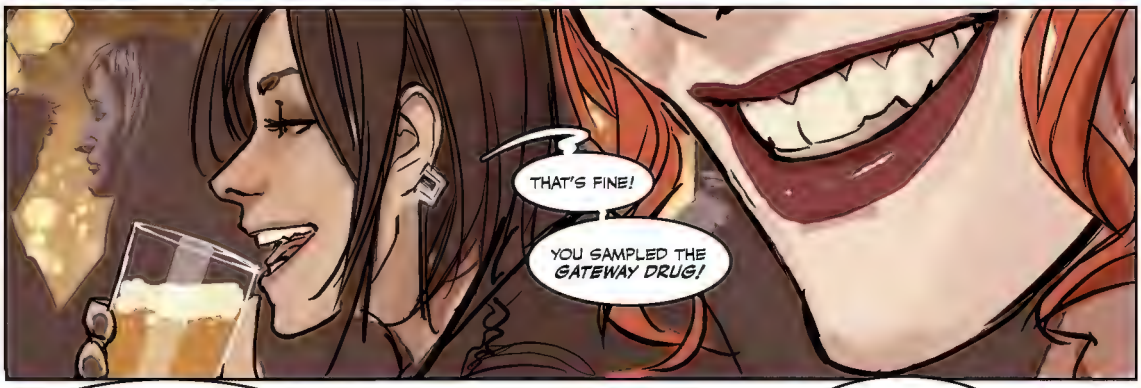
ARE YOU SHITTING ME RIGHT NOW!?

HEHEHEH, YOU'RE WELCOME?

IT'S TIME TO TRUST MY INSTINCTS, CLOSE MY EYES AND LEAP!!!

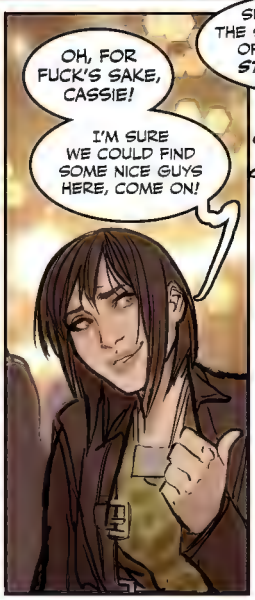
CLEVER GIRL!
WHAT?
YOU PLANNED THIS!
HEY, I DIDN'T NEED ANY PLANNING.

THIS FESTIVAL LISTED A BAND THAT DOES METAL COVERS OF BROADWAY TUNES...IT'S LITERALLY LIKE, MY MUSIC AND YOUR MUSIC BUMPING UGLIES!
IF ANYTHING COULD GET YOU TO BANG YOUR HEAD, THIS WAS IT!
WELL, I'M STILL NOT FULLY SOLD ON THE WHOLE GENRE...
BUT I'LL ADMIT, THIS WAS FUCKING AWESOME.


THAT'S FINE!
YOU SAMPLED THE GATEWAY DRUG!

AND NOW, STEP TWO OF MY MASTER PLAN -- WHICH I TOTALLY DON'T HAVE --
WE FIND SOME HOT METALHEADS TO DATE!

AGAIN... PASS!


OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE, CASSIE!
I'M SURE WE COULD FIND SOME NICE GUYS HERE, COME ON!

SURE, I MEAN THE SHEER VARIETY OF CHOICES IS STAGGERING!
WE COULD GO FOR A LONG-HAIRED GUY WEARING BLACK WITH A BEARD OOOR... WITHOOOUUT A BEARD!

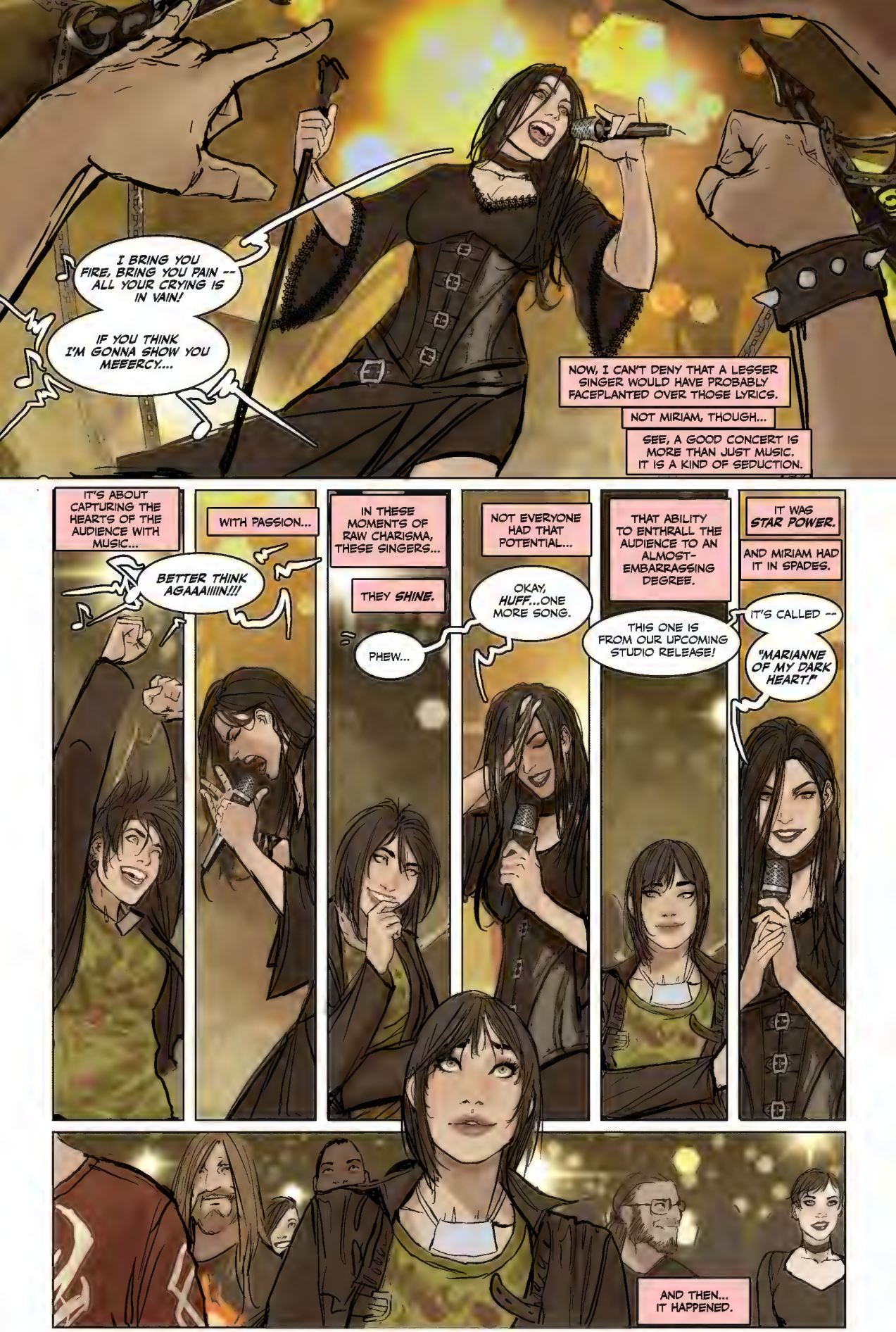
HEY NOW! I MAY NOT KNOW YOU, BUT THAT, RIGHT THERE, IS AN UNFAIR STEREOTYPE.
THIS, OF COURSE COMING FROM A LONGISH-HAIRED BEARDED GUY WEARING BLACK!
HEY, BY METAL STANDARDS, THIS IS MILITARY SHORT. ANYWAY, HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF I JUST WENT AND PRESUMED YOU TO BE AN IRISH... POORLY TANNING... VAMPIRE?
SAY WHAT?
OF COURSE, YOU COULD EASILY PROVE ME WRONG. IF I WAS TO BUY YOU A DRINK...THAT WOULD, YOU KNOW...DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU CAN HANDLE MORTAL BEVERAGES?
SO?
THAT'S A NO, THEN?
I DON'T KNOW HOW THAT ICEBREAKER WORKED ON OTHER GIRLS, BUT I PREFER NOT BEING INSULTED FIRST, THEN OFFERED A DRINK SECOND.
I DISTINCTLY REMEMBER YOU KICKING THINGS OFF WITH "ALL METALHEADS LOOK ALIKE."
THAT WAS A PRIVATE CONVERSATION!
YOU WERE SHOUTING.

YEAH, WELL, IF I'M SHOUTING, IT'S BECAUSE MY EARS ARE RINGING FROM THE MUSIC.
AND ANYWAY, I'M JUST NOT BIG ON METAL. SIMPLE AS THAT.
THEN WHAT THE FUCK WAS YOUR GEEKING OUT ON THE FLOOR OUT THERE ALL ABOUT?
OH, WHAT? A METAL BAND DOING A COVER OF ONE OF MY FAVORITE MUSICALS?
GEE, I WONDER WHAT MIGHT HAVE CAUSED MY GEEKOUT?
SO, YOU LIKE MUSICALS?
YEAH...WHY?
JUST ASKING.
AND I'M GUESSING YOUR FRIEND HERE IS THE METALHEAD?
HELL YEAH!
WHAT STUFF HAVE YOU BEEN RECOMMENDING TO HER?
I DON'T KNOW -- I'M VERY MUCH INTO POWER METAL THESE DAYS, SO MOSTLY THAT.
OOOH, NOW THERE'S YOUR PROBLEM!
HAVE YOU BEEN KEEPING UP WITH ANY SYMPHONIC OR SYMPHONIC-GOTH METAL BANDS?
GOT A FEW ON MY TO LISTEN LIST...
WHY?
BECAUSE THAT'S HOW YOU'LL GET YOUR FRIEND TO GET INTO METAL!
YOU START WITH SOME NIGHTW --
UH... 'SCUSE ME!

TWO OF YOU NEED SOME PRIVACY, MAYBE? I CAN LEAVE?
NAH. SHE'S ALREADY A METALHEAD, IT'S YOU WE ARE TRYING TO CONVERT HERE!

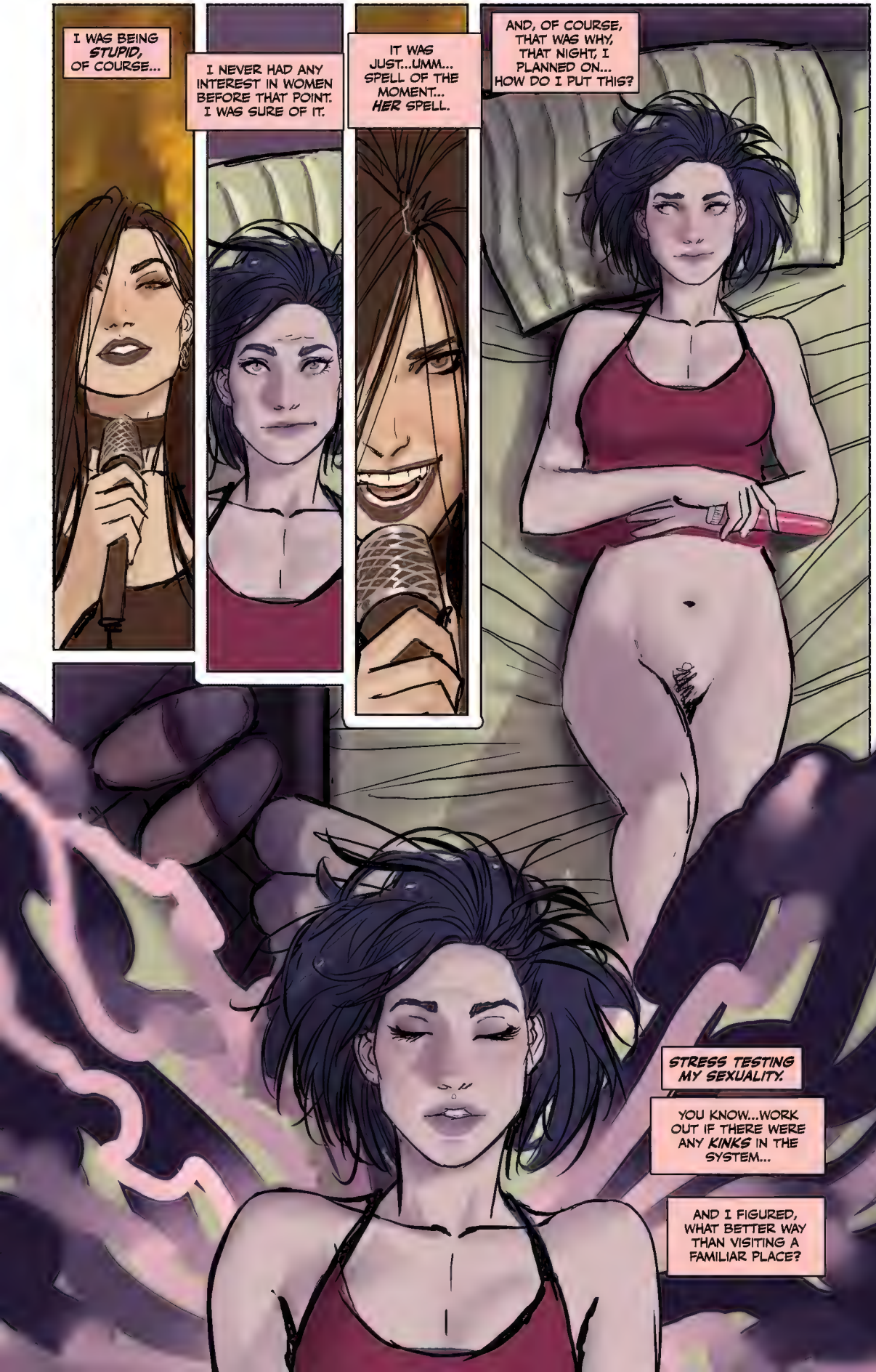
BUT IF YOU'RE THAT SET ON LEAVING, HERE'S MY NUMBER. IN CASE YOU EVER WANT SOME NEW BAND SUGGESTIONS.
WELL AREN'T YOU JUST INVESTED IN MY MUSICAL TASTES.
YEAH...I'VE BEEN KNOWN TO GET A LITTLE PREACHY ABOUT THIS STUFF AT TIMES...
BUT I DO THINK YOU'D MAKE A COOL METALHEAD.
NOW, SEE? THAT'S A MUCH BETTER WAY OF FISHING FOR MY NUMBER! WELL DONE! WELL...BETTER DONE.
I'M NOT FISHING! I MEAN, DON'T GET ME WRONG. I DO LIKE YOU. I WOULDN'T MIND GETTING TO KNOW YOU BETTER, BUT I'M ALSO A HUGE METAL GEEK! SO IN THIS CASE, IT'S ABOUT THE MUSIC.
YOU...LIKE ME?
JUST LIKE THAT, HUH?
YOU SURE SEEM...
UM...
HONEST?
HEY, FOR YEARS PEOPLE TOLD ME I HAD NO POKER FACE AND COULDN'T LIE FOR SHIT.
I KNOW HOW TO TAKE A HINT...
SO I JUST STICK WITH THE TRUTH. I MEANT WHAT I SAID. ALL OF IT.
I'M TOM. TOM WILSON.
CASSANDRA CONNELLY.
UH... CASSIE.
HEY, CASSIE, YOU DON'T NEED ME HERE, DO YOU? THERE'S A NEW BAND COMING UP...
I'LL BE FINE.
TOM HERE SWEARS TO TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH!
I THINK I MIGHT JUST CROSS-EXAMINE THE WITNESS!

THERE IS THIS BORDERLINE RUDE THING CASSIE WOULD DO TO PEOPLE SHE HAD NO INTEREST IN...
SHE HAD AN UNCANNY ABILITY TO CONDUCT HOUR-LONG CONVERSATIONS WITHOUT EVEN LOOKING AT THEM.
BUT WITH INTERESTING PEOPLE, AND THOSE SHE LIKED...
SHE COULDN'T HELP BUT MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT.
I WASN'T SURE IF SHE WAS MERELY INTRIGUED OR ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN THIS TOM GUY, BUT I WAS GENUINELY HAPPY FOR HER.
FUNNY HOW A SIMPLE THING LIKE GOING TO A CONCERT COULD HAVE SUCH AN EFFECT ON SO MANY LIVES.
CASSIE MET HER HUSBAND...
TOM MET HIS WIFE...
AND ME?
I FOUND MIRIAM.
WE ARE UNBREAKABLEEE!!!
FORGED BY TORMENT SEVENTY TIMES --
IT'S INESCAPABLEEEE!!
TONIGHT YOU'LL PAY THE PRICE FOR YOUR CRIMES!
THE SONG WAS CHEESY AS FUCK...
BUT IT WAS THE GOOD KIND OF CHEESY, THE KIND YOU GET FROM THE MOST GLORIOUS OF POWER METAL BALLADS...


I BRING YOU FIRE, BRING YOU PAIN -- ALL YOUR CRYING IS IN VAIN!
IF YOU THINK I'M GONNA SHOW YOU MEEERCY....
NOW, I CAN'T DENY THAT A LESSER SINGER WOULD HAVE PROBABLY FACEPLANTED OVER THOSE LYRICS.
NOT MIRIAM, THOUGH...
SEE, A GOOD CONCERT IS MORE THAN JUST MUSIC. IT IS A KIND OF SEDUCTION.
IT'S ABOUT CAPTURING THE HEARTS OF THE AUDIENCE WITH MUSIC...
BETTER THINK AGAAAIIIIN!!!
WITH PASSION...
IN THESE MOMENTS OF RAW CHARISMA, THESE SINGERS...
THEY SHINE.
PHEW...
NOT EVERYONE HAD THAT POTENTIAL...
OKAY, HUFF...ONE MORE SONG.
THAT ABILITY TO ENTHRALL THE AUDIENCE TO AN ALMOST-EMBARRASSING DEGREE.
THIS ONE IS FROM OUR UPCOMING STUDIO RELEASE!
IT WAS STAR POWER.
AND MIRIAM HAD IT IN SPADES.
IT'S CALLED --
"MARIANNE OF MY DARK HEART!"
AND THEN... IT HAPPENED.

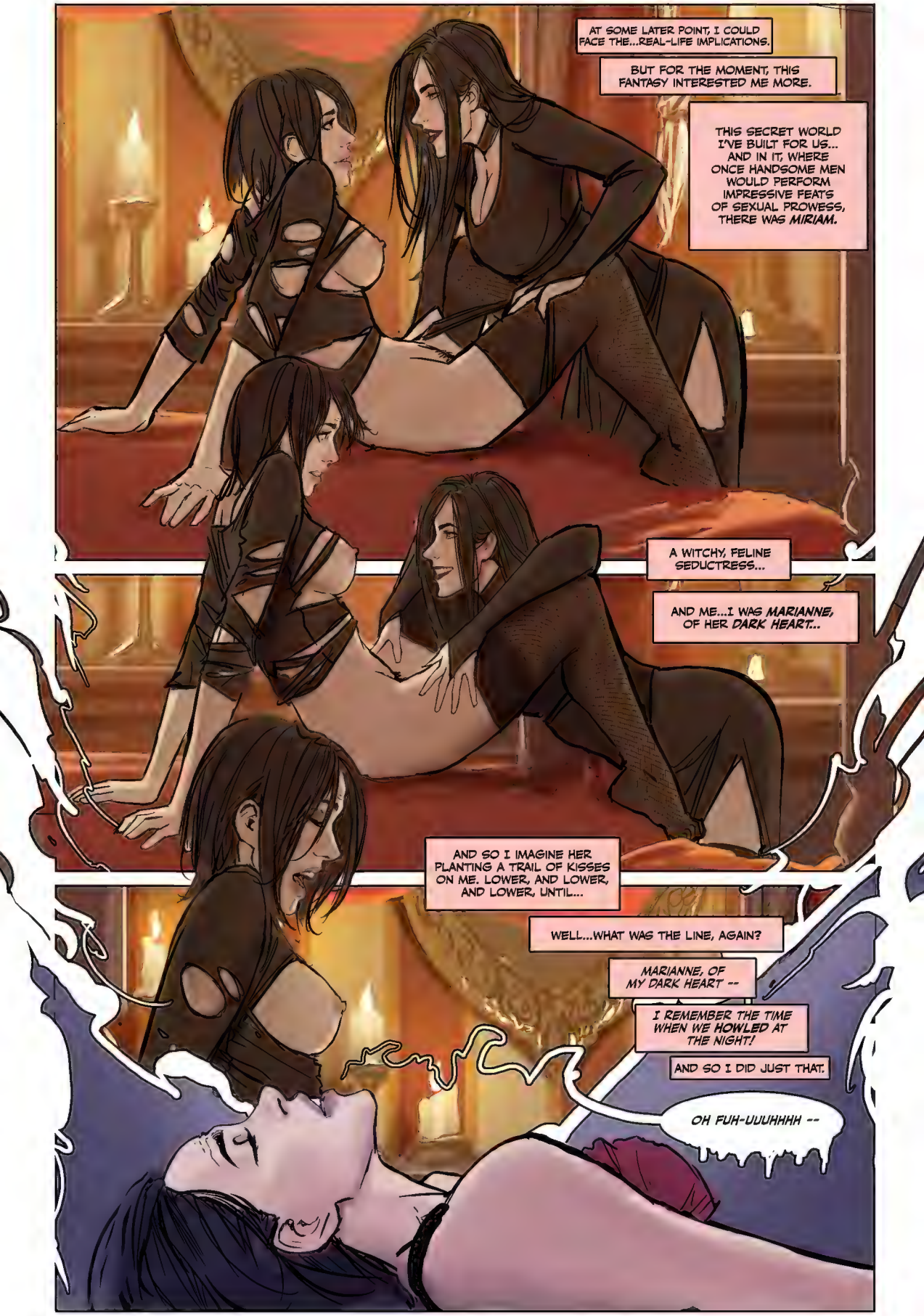
MARIANNE, OF MY DARK HEART!
I REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN WE HOWLED AT THE NIGHT --
NOW YOU'RE GONE, AND IT'S TEARING ME APART...
WE COULD NEVER IMAGINE LOSING TO THE MORNING LIIIIGHT!
SOMETIMES, THERE IS A MOMENT OF *PURE MAGIC* THAT YOU CAN EXPERIENCE DURING A CONCERT.
IF YOU ARE VERY LUCKY, DURING THEIR MOMENT OF GLORY, AS THE SONG EXPLODES IN THE AIR, A SINGER WILL BRIEFLY LOOK STRAIGHT AT YOU.
AND ALL WILL CEASE TO MATTER, BECAUSE AT THAT MOMENT IT FEELS LIKE THEY ARE SINGING TO YOU... SINGING JUST *FOR* YOU.
THEN AGAIN, MAYBE THAT'S JUST MY WAY OF SEEING IT...

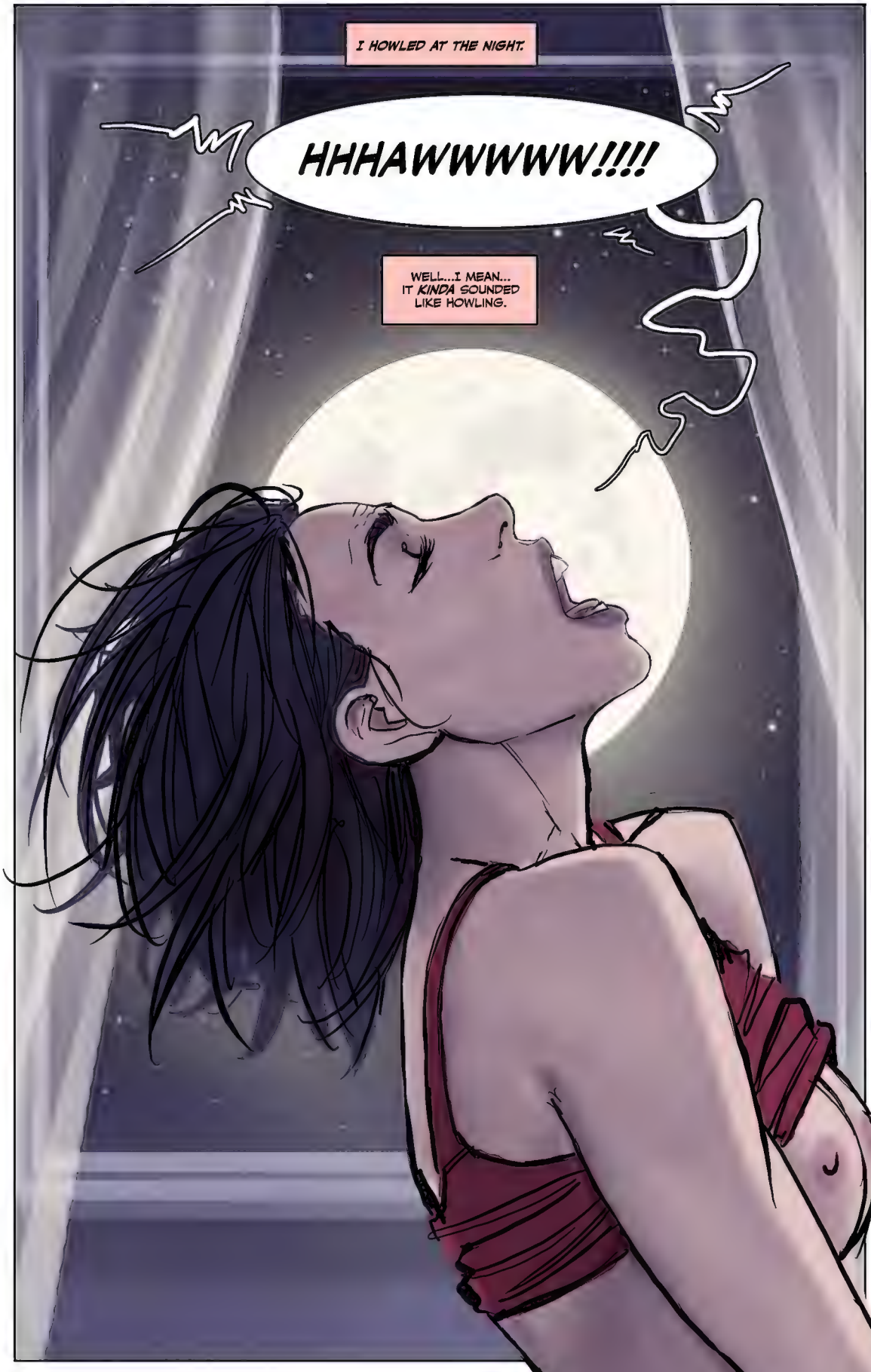
I WILL ADMIT TO A BORDERLINE UNHEALTHY OBSESSION WITH SOME OF THE FRONTMEN OF THE BANDS I ADMIRED. LORD KNOWS THEIR CONCERT TICKETS TOOK UP MOST OF MY FUN-FUNDS.
AND DURING EVERY CONCERT, I SECRETLY HOPED FOR THAT SPECIAL MOMENT...
THE MOMENT WHEN THEY WOULD LOOK AT ME.
NOT SURE IF IT QUALIFIES AS A *KINK,* BUT I'LL BE DAMNED IF IT DIDN'T *DO THINGS* TO ME.
THE TRUTH IS, THOSE *"SING TO ME"* MOMENTS TURNED ME ON SO MUCH I COULD ALMOST HEAR AN AUDIBLE *GULP*...AND IT WASN'T COMING FROM MY THROAT.
THAT NIGHT, HOWEVER, IT WASN'T SOME LONG-HAIRED, LEAN GUY CLAD IN LEATHER AND JEANS SINGING ON THE STAGE. IT WAS *MIRIAM* -- AND YET, IT FELT THE SAME. IN THAT MAGICAL MOMENT, I LOOKED AT HER, AND AS SHE GAVE ME A SECOND OF HER ATTENTION...
I FELT THE FAMILIAR WARMTH SPREADING... I FELT *THE GULP.*
AND AT THAT MOMENT, A PECULIAR REALIZATION HIT ME.
HEH... HOLY FUCK!


I WAS BEING *STUPID*, OF COURSE...
I NEVER HAD ANY INTEREST IN WOMEN BEFORE THAT POINT. I WAS SURE OF IT.
IT WAS JUST...UMM... SPELL OF THE MOMENT... *HER* SPELL.
AND, OF COURSE, THAT WAS WHY, THAT NIGHT, I PLANNED ON... HOW DO I PUT THIS?
STRESS TESTING MY SEXUALITY.
YOU KNOW...WORK OUT IF THERE WERE ANY *KINKS* IN THE SYSTEM...
AND I FIGURED, WHAT BETTER WAY THAN VISITING A FAMILIAR PLACE?

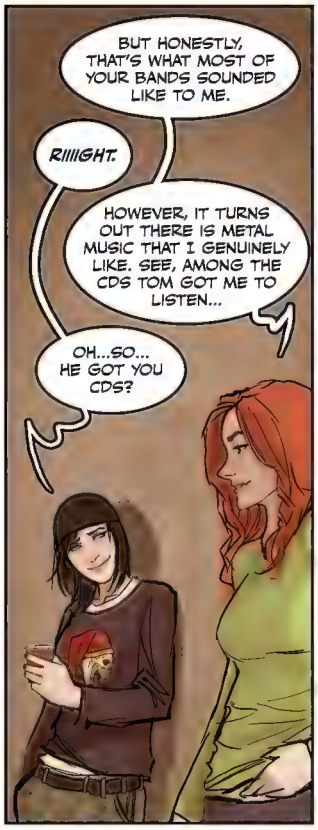
A FAMILIAR FANTASY, ONE I INDULGED IN OFTEN. IN IT, I WAS AN EAGER GROUPIE CALLED FOR A PRIVATE MEETING...
A BIT OF SEXUAL ESCAPISM I OFTEN REVISITED BUT HAD *NO INTEREST* EXPLORING IN REAL LIFE.
MY PARTNERS WOULD OFTEN CHANGE --
SINGERS.
BASS PLAYERS.
VAMPIRES...
DON'T JUDGE! IT WAS A PHASE...
I LOVED THIS FANTASY FOR ITS PACING. IT WAS MY SEXUAL *HAPPY PLACE.*
A WELL-SCRIPTED AND THOROUGHLY REHEARSED SCENARIO.
BUT THAT NIGHT, THE ROLE OF A HAIRY, STRAPPING MALE PROTAGONIST WAS PLAYED BY A SURPRISING *UP-AND-COMER...*

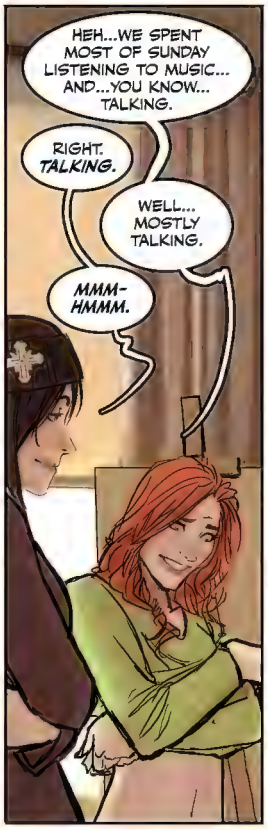
I SLID INTO THIS SCENARIO WITH *SURPRISING* EASE.
WHERE ONCE I THOUGHT OF ROUGH HANDS TOUCHING ME AND BRISTLY FACES PLANTING KISSES, HERE WAS SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT.
A *TENDER* FANTASY.
I IMAGINED LONG, SILKY HAIR CARESSING ME AS SHE MOVED.
I IMAGINED HER SCENT, AND SMALL WHISPERS OF THAT WONDERFUL VOICE...
"DO I EXCITE YOU, MARIANNE?"
YES...
SHE REACHES DOWN, AND AS SHE DOES, SO DO I...
IN MY FANTASY, *HER* HANDS FIND ME AS EAGER AS MY OWN DO.
I AM WAY PAST THE POINT OF A *SEXUAL TEST-DRIVE.*
I SLAM THAT PEDAL TO THE METAL AND GO OFF-ROAD...

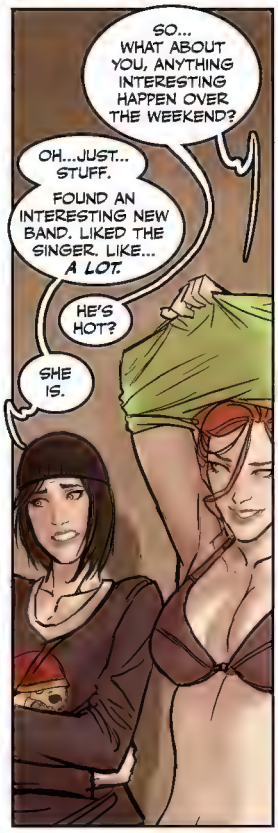

AT SOME LATER POINT, I COULD FACE THE...REAL-LIFE IMPLICATIONS.
BUT FOR THE MOMENT, THIS FANTASY INTERESTED ME MORE.
THIS SECRET WORLD I'VE BUILT FOR US... AND IN IT, WHERE ONCE HANDSOME MEN WOULD PERFORM IMPRESSIVE FEATS OF SEXUAL PROWESS, THERE WAS MIRIAM.
A WITCHY, FELINE SEDUCTRESS...
AND ME...I WAS MARIANNE, OF HER DARK HEART...
AND SO I IMAGINE HER PLANTING A TRAIL OF KISSES ON ME. LOWER, AND LOWER, AND LOWER, UNTIL...
WELL...WHAT WAS THE LINE, AGAIN?
MARIANNE, OF MY DARK HEART --
I REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN WE HOWLED AT THE NIGHT!
AND SO I DID JUST THAT.
OH FUH-UUUHHHH --

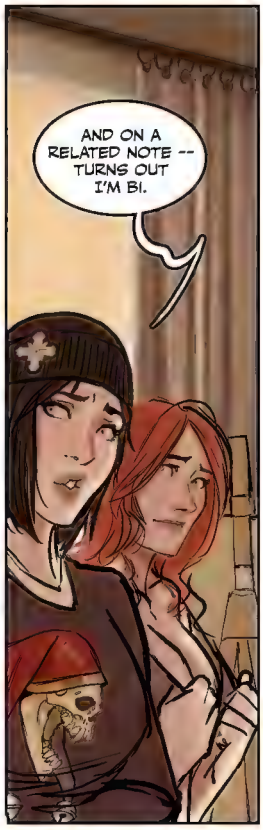

I HOWLED AT THE NIGHT.
HHHAWWWWW!!!!
WELL...I MEAN... IT KINDA SOUNDED LIKE HOWLING.

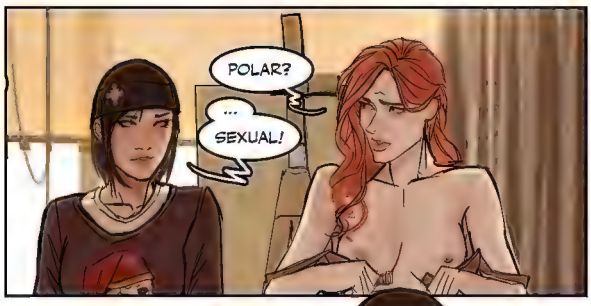
OH, NO. IT DEFINITELY SOUNDED LIKE HOWLING.

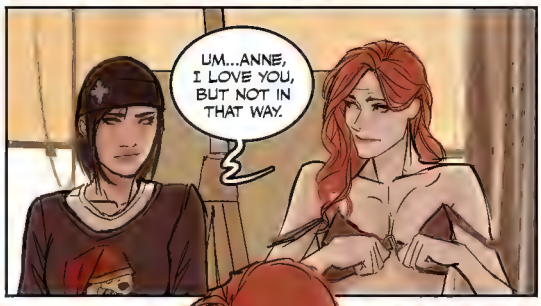

BUT HONESTLY, THAT'S WHAT MOST OF YOUR BANDS SOUNDED LIKE TO ME.
R!!!!IGHT.
HOWEVER, IT TURNS OUT THERE IS METAL MUSIC THAT I GENUINELY LIKE. SEE, AMONG THE CDS TOM GOT ME TO LISTEN...
OH...SO... HE GOT YOU CDS?


HEH...WE SPENT MOST OF SUNDAY LISTENING TO MUSIC... AND...YOU KNOW... TALKING.
RIGHT. TALKING.
WELL... MOSTLY TALKING.
MMM-HMMM.


SO... WHAT ABOUT YOU, ANYTHING INTERESTING HAPPEN OVER THE WEEKEND?
OH...JUST... STUFF.
FOUND AN INTERESTING NEW BAND. LIKED THE SINGER. LIKE... A LOT.
HE'S HOT?
SHE IS.


AND ON A RELATED NOTE -- TURNS OUT I'M BI.


POLAR?
...
SEXUAL!


UM...ANNE, I LOVE YOU, BUT NOT IN THAT WAY.

OH, FUCK RIGHT OFF!
HEY, I'M JUST BEING HONEST.
I DON'T SWING THAT WAY AND I DON'T WANT TO BREAK YOUR DELICATE LITTLE HEART.

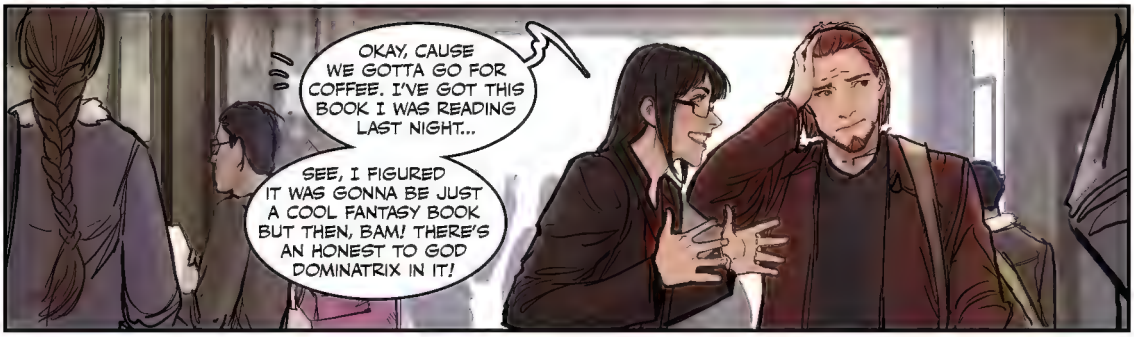
OH, HELL NO! I CAN DO SOOO MUCH BETTER THAN YOU!
OH, YOU WISH!
SO, WHEN DID YOU FIGURE *THIS* OUT?
OKAY, YOU KNOW WHEN I LEFT YOU AND TOM ALONE AND...
MISS CONNELLY, YOU READY?
ALMOST!
COFFEE LATER, OKAY?
SURE!
OH, ALSO -- ANNE?
YEAH?

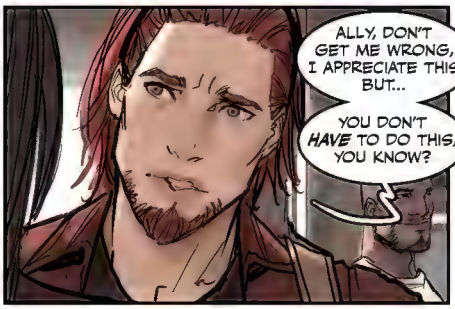
TRY AND CONTROL YOUR ORGASMS, OKAY?
OH GOD, IT'S LIKE JACKSON POLLOCK GOT SHITFACED.
BITCH, YOU WANT ME!
HEH!
YOU WANNA HEAR SOMETHING FUNNY?
WHEN I TOLD HER I WAS BI, SHE COVERED UP.
I REMEMBER THAT BECAUSE IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I EVER FELT DOUBT WHEN BEING HONEST WITH CASSIE.
THE FIRST TIME I REGRETTED TELLING HER SOMETHING.
IT DIDN'T LAST LONG...BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME I THOUGHT TO MYSELF -- "WHAT IF I JUST LOST HER?"
I ASKED HER ABOUT IT LATER THAT DAY...SHE LAUGHED AND SAID THAT IT JUST DIDN'T FEEL LIKE A TITS-OUT CONVERSATION.
AND THAT WAS CASSIE IN A NUTSHELL.
IN THE END, THE ONLY THING THAT CHANGED WAS THAT NOW SHE HAD SOME AMMO TO FIRE BACK AT MY STRIPPER JOKES.
AND SO...I WAS MYSELF AROUND HER ONCE AGAIN.
I MEAN...THAT WAS WHY WE BECAME FRIENDS IN THE FIRST PLACE...
AND LORD KNOWS I NEEDED FRIENDS -- CAUSE MY LIFE WAS ABOUT TO GET NUTS.

I REMEMBER WAKING UP... AND SMILING.
THAT FELT...STRANGE.
I KNEW IT WASN'T THE WEEKEND. I LOVED WEEKENDS.
NO, THIS WAS, FOR LACK OF A BETTER TERM, A SCHOOL DAY.
IT TOOK ME A MOMENT...
BUT THEN I REMEMBERED.
OH...THAT'S RIGHT!
I MET SOMEBODY YESTERDAY...
YOU'RE IN A GOOD MOOD...
ALL THE GOSSIP BULLSHIT FINALLY SUBSIDING?
IT'S PARTIALLY THAT...

IT WAS TRUE. ALL GOSSIP HAD A SHELF LIFE...AND MINE SEEMED TO BE HITTING ITS EXPIRATION DATE.
BUT THAT WASN'T THE REASON I SMILED.
NO, I SMILED BECAUSE OF A *LIBRARY.*
A *PARK BENCH.*
A *COFFEE PLACE.*
I SMILED BECAUSE OF THE *PERSON* WHO MADE THOSE PLACES SPECIAL.
DUDE! *HUFF* *PANT*
SLOW DOWN!!! I CAN RUN BUT NOT -- *WHEEZE*
-- NOT UP THE STAIRS WITH A BAG FULL OF BOOKS!

ALLY?
YEAH! SO, LISTEN, YOU FREE AROUND 1 PM?
UM... SURE?


OKAY, CAUSE WE GOTTA GO FOR COFFEE. I'VE GOT THIS BOOK I WAS READING LAST NIGHT...
SEE, I FIGURED IT WAS GONNA BE JUST A COOL FANTASY BOOK BUT THEN, BAM! THERE'S AN HONEST TO GOD DOMINATRIX IN IT!

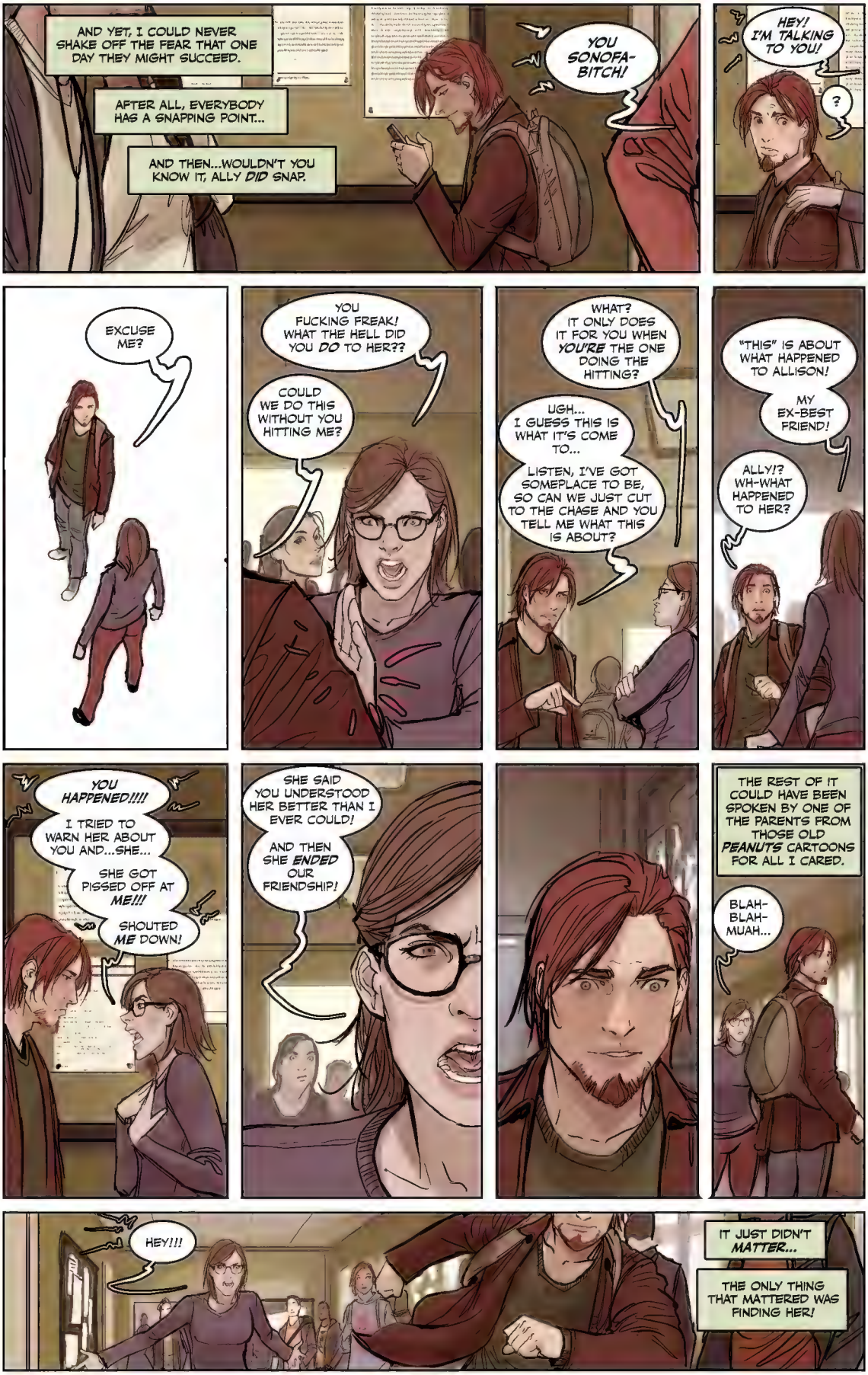

ALLY, DON'T GET ME WRONG, I APPRECIATE THIS BUT...
YOU DON'T *HAVE* TO DO THIS, YOU KNOW?

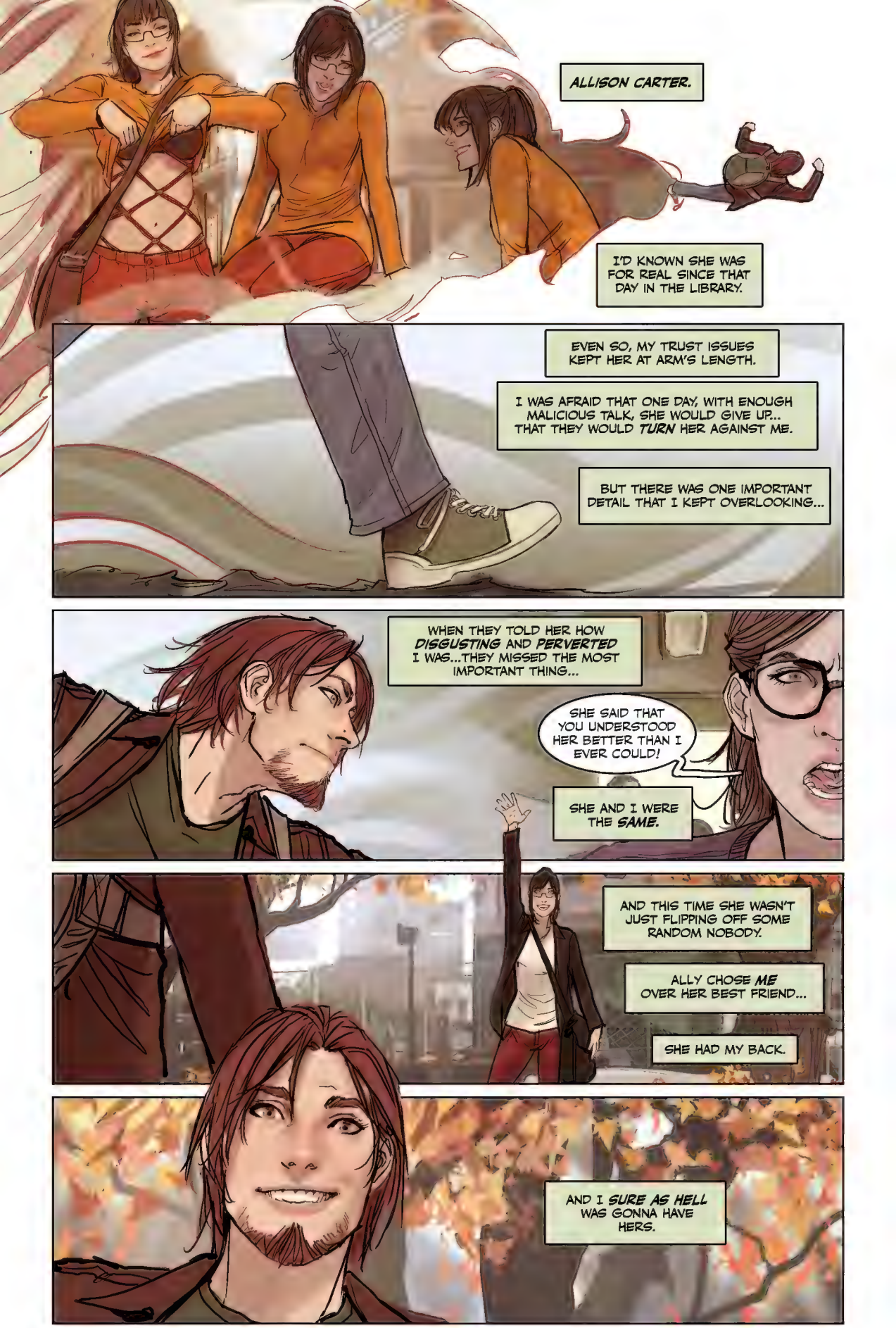
DO WHAT?

YOU KNOW... HANG AROUND ME *IN PUBLIC.*
I MEAN... YOU DON'T NEED MY REPUTATION RUBBING OFF ON YOU.
TRUST ME ON THIS ONE.

YOU JUST MADE THAT SOUND *DIRTY.*
I'M SERIOUS. IF YOU STICK WITH ME OPENLY LIKE THIS, THEY *WILL* TALK.
ALAN...
WHAT?
FUCK THEM!
FUCK EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM!
HISTO
"FUCK THEM ALL..." IT WAS A FAMILIAR ATTITUDE. LORD KNOWS I'D BEEN WEARING IT LIKE A SUIT OF ARMOR LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW ITS FLAWS.

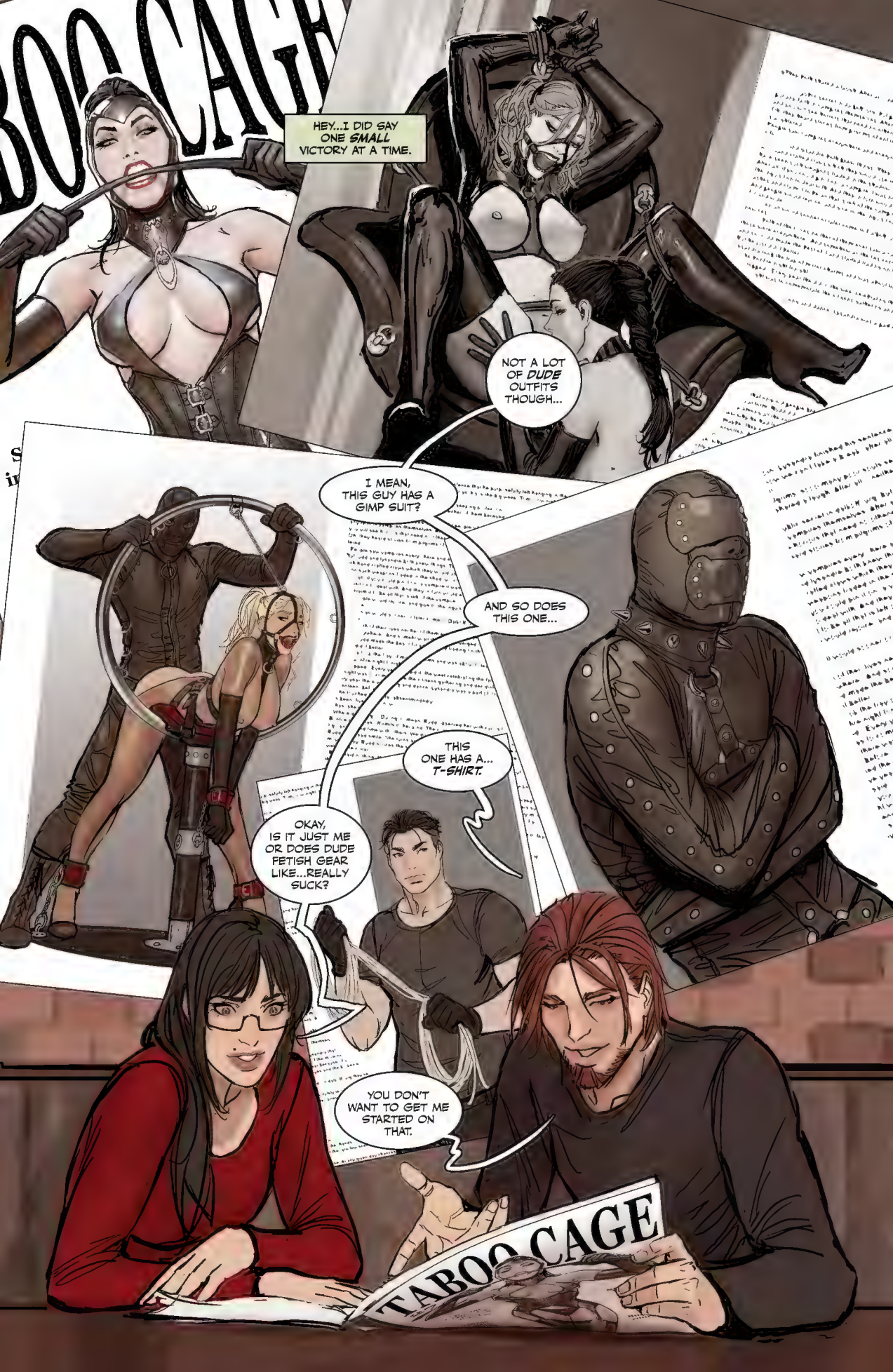
YEAH, IT WAS TRUE THAT BY THEN MOST OF PEOPLE WHO MADE FUN OF ME HAD MOVED ON TO FRESH ENTERTAINMENT...
BUT GOSSIP IS A HYDRA. EVEN AS IT LAY DYING, I KNEW THAT ALLY AND ME SEEN TOGETHER COULD REAWAKEN IT, GIVE IT FIVE HEADS AND A STRONG PAIR OF LEGS TO STAND ON...
SO I DID THE ONLY THING THAT MADE SENSE TO ME.
I AVOIDED HER IN THE HALLWAYS...
MADE EXCUSES AS TO WHY WE COULD ONLY MEET FAR FROM COLLEGE...
BUT YOU CAN'T ESCAPE ALLY.
NO MORE THAN YOU CAN ESCAPE GOSSIP!
AND SO, INEVITABLY, PEOPLE STARTED APPROACHING ALLY WITH TOTALLY LEGIT "INFORMATION" ABOUT ME...
AFTER ALL, A PERSON IN THE TOILET NEXT DOOR TOLD A CLASSMATE'S NEIGHBOR HOW DANGEROUS I WAS!
SHE NEEDED TO BE SAVED!
ALLY KEPT HER RESPONSE SHORT, SIMPLE, AND TO THE POINT --


AND YET, I COULD NEVER SHAKE OFF THE FEAR THAT ONE DAY THEY MIGHT SUCCEED.
AFTER ALL, EVERYBODY HAS A SNAPPING POINT...
AND THEN...WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT, ALLY DID SNAP.
YOU SONOFA-BITCH!
HEY! I'M TALKING TO YOU!
?
EXCUSE ME?
YOU FUCKING FREAK! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO TO HER??
COULD WE DO THIS WITHOUT YOU HITTING ME?
WHAT? IT ONLY DOES IT FOR YOU WHEN YOU'RE THE ONE DOING THE HITTING?
UGH... I GUESS THIS IS WHAT IT'S COME TO...
LISTEN, I'VE GOT SOMEPLACE TO BE, SO CAN WE JUST CUT TO THE CHASE AND YOU TELL ME WHAT THIS IS ABOUT?
"THIS" IS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO ALLISON!
MY EX-BEST FRIEND!
ALLY!? WH-WHAT HAPPENED TO HER?
YOU HAPPENED!!!!
I TRIED TO WARN HER ABOUT YOU AND...SHE...
SHE GOT PISSED OFF AT ME!!!
SHOUTED ME DOWN!
SHE SAID YOU UNDERSTOOD HER BETTER THAN I EVER COULD!
AND THEN SHE ENDED OUR FRIENDSHIP!
THE REST OF IT COULD HAVE BEEN SPOKEN BY ONE OF THE PARENTS FROM THOSE OLD PEANUTS CARTOONS FOR ALL I CARED.
BLAH-BLAH-MUAH...
HEY!!!
IT JUST DIDN'T MATTER...
THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERED WAS FINDING HER!


ALLISON CARTER.
I'D KNOWN SHE WAS FOR REAL SINCE THAT DAY IN THE LIBRARY.
EVEN SO, MY TRUST ISSUES KEPT HER AT ARM'S LENGTH.
I WAS AFRAID THAT ONE DAY, WITH ENOUGH MALICIOUS TALK, SHE WOULD GIVE UP... THAT THEY WOULD TURN HER AGAINST ME.
BUT THERE WAS ONE IMPORTANT DETAIL THAT I KEPT OVERLOOKING...
WHEN THEY TOLD HER HOW DISGUSTING AND PERVERTED I WAS...THEY MISSED THE MOST IMPORTANT THING...
SHE SAID THAT YOU UNDERSTOOD HER BETTER THAN I EVER COULD!
SHE AND I WERE THE SAME.
AND THIS TIME SHE WASN'T JUST FLIPPING OFF SOME RANDOM NOBODY.
ALLY CHOSE ME OVER HER BEST FRIEND...
SHE HAD MY BACK.
AND I SURE AS HELL WAS GONNA HAVE HERS.

I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO OFFER HER...BUT I WANTED HER TO KNOW THAT I UNDERSTOOD HOW BIG THIS WAS FOR HER..
I WANTED HER TO KNOW HOW BIG THIS WAS FOR ME. THAT I TRULY APPRECIATED HER. TRULY TRUSTED HER.
AND THEN IT HIT ME...
BUT THAT...
THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY I COULD SHOW IT...
JUST...FOR SAFE KEEPING.
ON THAT DAY, WE WENT FROM BEING FRIENDS TO BEING BEST FRIENDS.
AND THAT LASTED FOR EIGHT WONDERFUL WEEKS.
AS FOR WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT...WELL...

I'LL GET TO THAT THE SAME WAY WE GOT TO IT -- ONE SMALL VICTORY AT A TIME.
ONE PACK OF CHEWING GUM.
CHEWMINT
ONE BAR OF CHOCOLATE...
NOUGAT
TABOO CAGE
27
Special interview: Mistress Lexis Ravage
Stay silent! Stay still! Full body harness
ONE...
TABOO CAGE?
OH, AND A COPY OF THE NEW YORK TIMES.
YES.
WEEK 1 OF OUR FRIENDSHIP: WE BOUGHT OUR FIRST PORN MAGAZINE TOGETHER.


HEY...I DID SAY ONE SMALL VICTORY AT A TIME.
NOT A LOT OF DUDE OUTFITS THOUGH...
I MEAN, THIS GUY HAS A GIMP SUIT?
AND SO DOES THIS ONE...
THIS ONE HAS A... T-SHIRT.
OKAY, IS IT JUST ME OR DOES DUDE FETISH GEAR LIKE...REALLY SUCK?
YOU DON'T WANT TO GET ME STARTED ON THAT.
TABOO CAGE

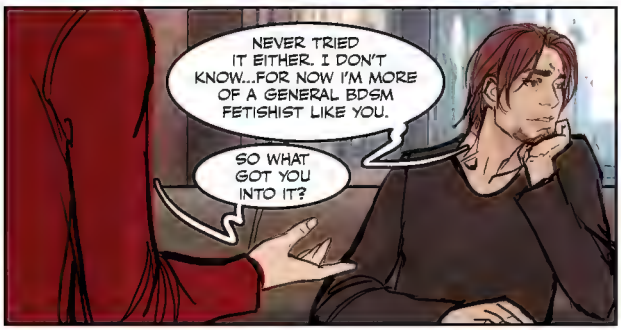
BY THE WAY... I WAS KINDA WONDERING?
ABOUT?
HOW DID YOU FIGURE OUT YOU WERE...INTO ALL OF THIS STUFF?
OH...THAT... I PRETTY MUCH TRIPPED INTO IT?

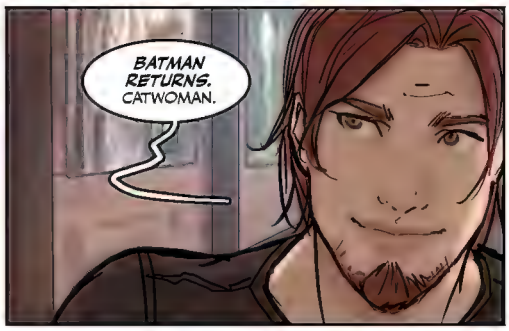
SEE, WHEN I WAS A KID... I KINDA-SORTA CRACKED THE PARENTAL LOCK ON THE CABLE TV AND... WELL, I SAW THIS PORN.
CAN'T LIE -- IT FREAKED ME THE FUCK OUT! BUT THE DOMINATRIX IN IT WAS FUCKING GORGEOUS.
I DUNNO... I GUESS SHE STUCK WITH ME.

SO THAT'S WHAT YOU WANNA BE? A DOMINATRIX?

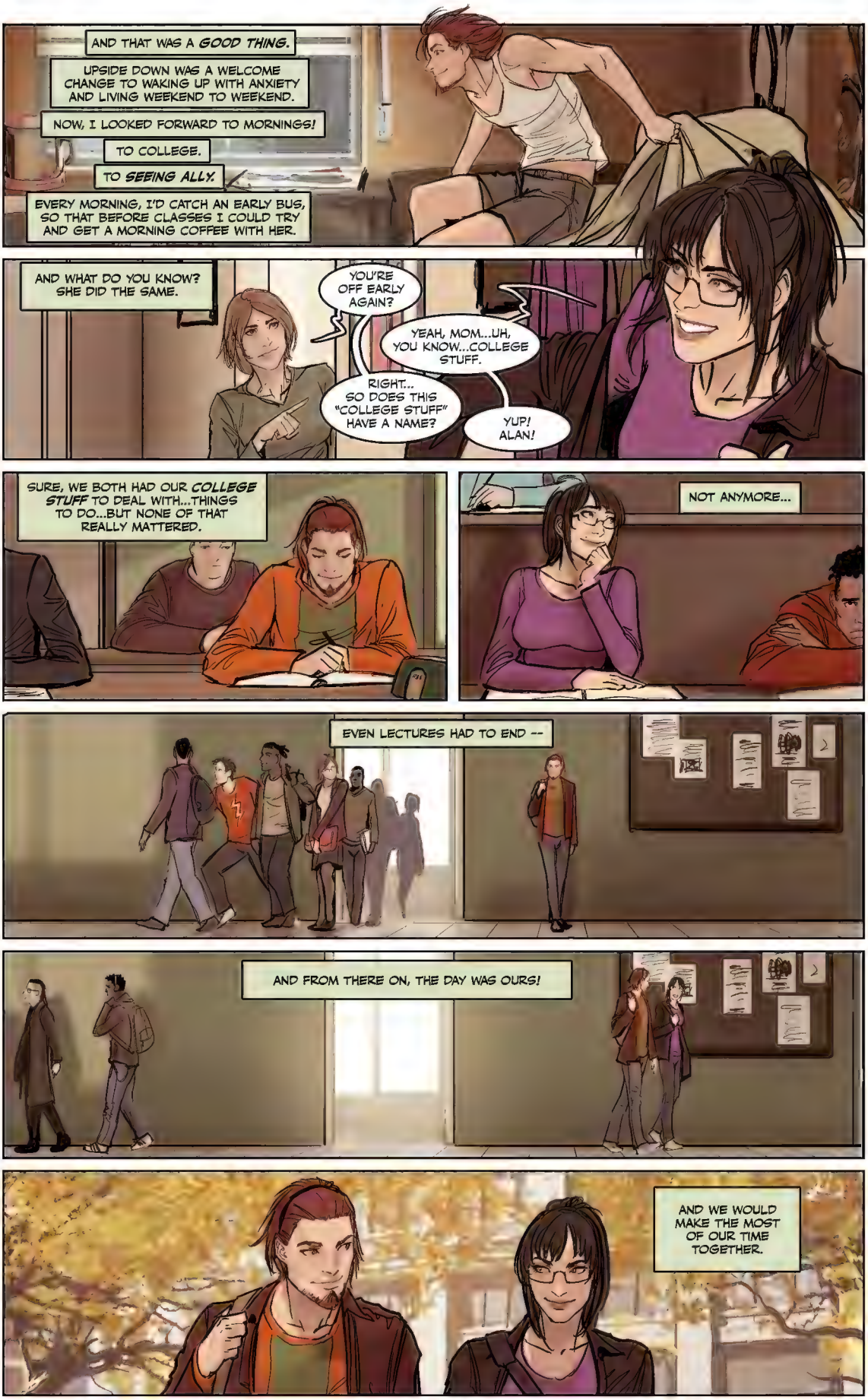
I DON'T KNOW...MAYBE? LIKE, I NEVER REALLY GOT TO TRY IT...
I DID PICK MY HAIRSTYLE BECAUSE IT SCREAMED "DOMME." SO THERE'S THAT!

HEH.
SO WHAT ABOUT YOU?


NEVER TRIED IT EITHER. I DON'T KNOW...FOR NOW I'M MORE OF A GENERAL BDSM FETISHIST LIKE YOU.
SO WHAT GOT YOU INTO IT?


BATMAN RETURNS. CATWOMAN.

DUDE! RIGHT HERE!
HEH!
THINKING BACK ON ALL OF THIS...
SHE TURNED MY LIFE UPSIDE DOWN.


AND THAT WAS A GOOD THING.
UPSIDE DOWN WAS A WELCOME CHANGE TO WAKING UP WITH ANXIETY AND LIVING WEEKEND TO WEEKEND.
NOW, I LOOKED FORWARD TO MORNINGS!
TO COLLEGE.
TO SEEING ALLY.
EVERY MORNING, I'D CATCH AN EARLY BUS, SO THAT BEFORE CLASSES I COULD TRY AND GET A MORNING COFFEE WITH HER.
AND WHAT DO YOU KNOW? SHE DID THE SAME.
YOU'RE OFF EARLY AGAIN?
YEAH, MOM...UH, YOU KNOW...COLLEGE STUFF.
RIGHT... SO DOES THIS "COLLEGE STUFF" HAVE A NAME?
YUP! ALAN!
SURE, WE BOTH HAD OUR COLLEGE STUFF TO DEAL WITH...THINGS TO DO...BUT NONE OF THAT REALLY MATTERED.
NOT ANYMORE...
EVEN LECTURES HAD TO END --
AND FROM THERE ON, THE DAY WAS OURS!
AND WE WOULD MAKE THE MOST OF OUR TIME TOGETHER.

BY WEEK 3, ALL THE THINGS WE WERE ONCE EMBARRASSED TO TRY ON OUR OWN...
YOU TWO BACK FOR MORE WEIRD PORN?
AND THE TIMES?
THEY GOT A LOT EASIER.
NO TIMES!
JUST THE WEIRD PORN, THANK YOU!
EASIER BECAUSE TOGETHER...WE WERE BRAVER.
TOGETHER, LIFE WAS FUN!
DUDE! STOP... EVERYTHING!
HOLY CRAP!
THAT'S ONE FINE-LOOKIN' BOOT!
I NEED A CHANGE OF UNDERWEAR RIGHT ABOUT NOW!!
I MEAN, THERE ARE FUCK-ME BOOTS...
BUT THESE... THESE ARE FUCK-YOU-WITH-A-STRAP-ON BOOTS!
THAT'S FROM THE ACCLAIMED FALL COLLECTION?
DILDO SOLD SEPARATELY.
WANNA GO IN AND TRY THEM ON?
I COULDN'T...
YOU KNOW, I ALWAYS WANTED TO TRY ON BOOTS LIKE THESE...BUT I ALWAYS FELT TOO EMBARRASSED TO ASK.
HEH. PLUS IT TAKES LIKE A WEEK TO TRY THEM ON, WHAT WITH ALL THE LACING.

NAH, THE LACES ARE DECORATIVE. THE BOOTS ARE ACTUALLY STRETCHY.
SO, NO TIME FOR ME TO GRAB A COFFEE?
NO, BUT YOU MAY WANT TO GRAB YOUR JAW FROM OFF THE FLOOR!
CAUSE, DUDE? YOU ARE SO NOT READY FOR THIS!
I GIVE YOU -- THE REASON I'LL BE CRYING MYSELF TO SLEEP FOR THE NEXT WEEK OR SO!
YOU KNOW, THE WEIRD THING WAS...BACK WHEN SHE DID HER ROPE THING IN THE LIBRARY, I WAS TOO STUNNED TO EVEN CONSIDER THE WHOLE THING SEXUAL IN ANY WAY.
EVEN AFTER THAT, I GUESS I WAS JUST TOO EXCITED TO TALK TO SOMEBODY ABOUT ALL THIS STUFF TO NOTICE...
BUT THAT DAY IN THE SHOE STORE...
I TRULY SAW HER.

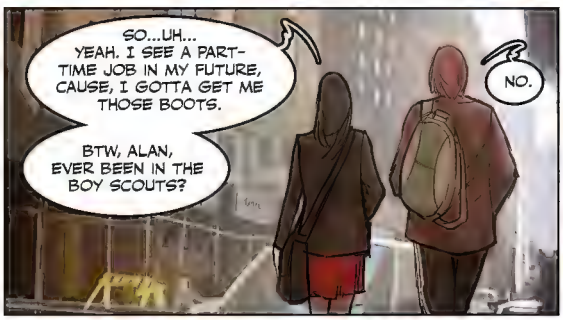
I SAW THE WOMAN THAT WOULD ONE DAY MAKE A CERTAIN REDHEADED, SUBMISSIVE WRITER KNEEL BEFORE HER...
SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK? DO I *PASS* AS A DOMINATRIX?
AND WHAT CAN I SAY... I WASN'T *IMMUNE.*
UH...YEAH... NAILING IT!

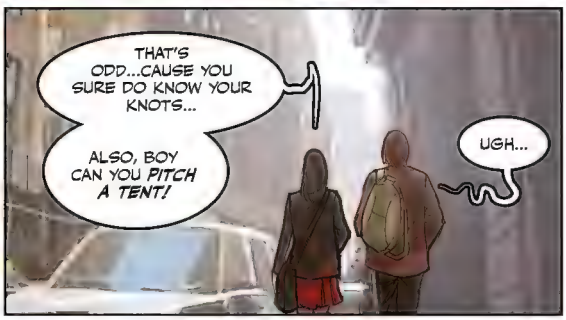
?

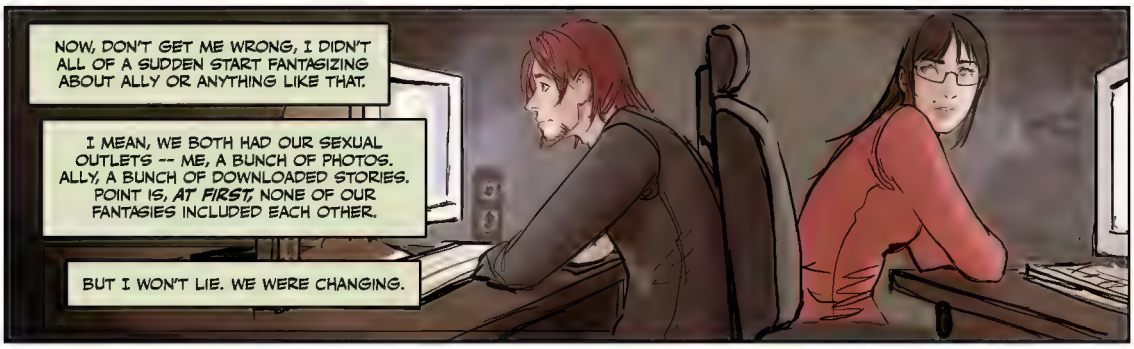
!

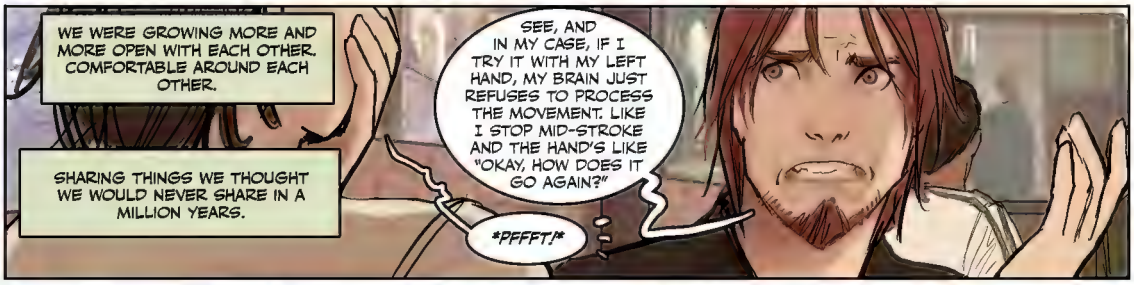
IIIII'M GONNA TAKE THESE OFF, NOW.

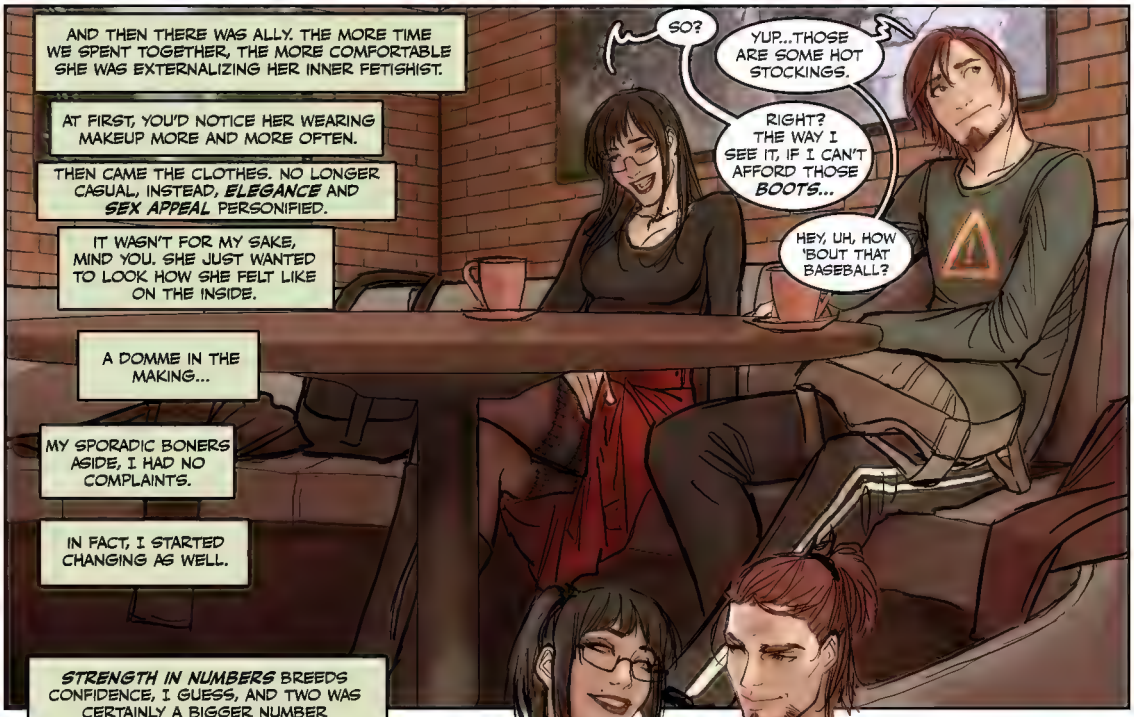
MMM-HMM!


SO...UH... YEAH. I SEE A PART-TIME JOB IN MY FUTURE, CAUSE, I GOTTA GET ME THOSE BOOTS.
BTW, ALAN, EVER BEEN IN THE BOY SCOUTS?
NO.


THAT'S ODD...CAUSE YOU SURE DO KNOW YOUR KNOTS...
ALSO, BOY CAN YOU *PITCH A TENT!*
UGH...


NOW, DON'T GET ME WRONG, I DIDN'T ALL OF A SUDDEN START FANTASIZING ABOUT ALLY OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT.
I MEAN, WE BOTH HAD OUR SEXUAL OUTLETS -- ME, A BUNCH OF PHOTOS. ALLY, A BUNCH OF DOWNLOADED STORIES. POINT IS, AT FIRST, NONE OF OUR FANTASIES INCLUDED EACH OTHER.
BUT I WON'T LIE. WE WERE CHANGING.


WE WERE GROWING MORE AND MORE OPEN WITH EACH OTHER. COMFORTABLE AROUND EACH OTHER.
SHARING THINGS WE THOUGHT WE WOULD NEVER SHARE IN A MILLION YEARS.
SEE, AND IN MY CASE, IF I TRY IT WITH MY LEFT HAND, MY BRAIN JUST REFUSES TO PROCESS THE MOVEMENT. LIKE I STOP MID-STROKE AND THE HAND'S LIKE "OKAY, HOW DOES IT GO AGAIN?"
PFFFT!


AND THEN THERE WAS ALLY. THE MORE TIME WE SPENT TOGETHER, THE MORE COMFORTABLE SHE WAS EXTERNALIZING HER INNER FETISHIST.
AT FIRST, YOU'D NOTICE HER WEARING MAKEUP MORE AND MORE OFTEN.
THEN CAME THE CLOTHES. NO LONGER CASUAL, INSTEAD, ELEGANCE AND SEX APPEAL PERSONIFIED.
IT WASN'T FOR MY SAKE, MIND YOU. SHE JUST WANTED TO LOOK HOW SHE FELT LIKE ON THE INSIDE.
A DOMME IN THE MAKING...
MY SPORADIC BONERS ASIDE, I HAD NO COMPLAINTS.
IN FACT, I STARTED CHANGING AS WELL.
SO?
YUP...THOSE ARE SOME HOT STOCKINGS.
RIGHT? THE WAY I SEE IT, IF I CAN'T AFFORD THOSE BOOTS...
HEY, UH, HOW 'BOUT THAT BASEBALL?

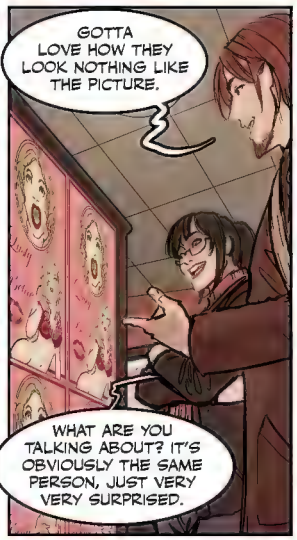
STRENGTH IN NUMBERS BREEDS CONFIDENCE, I GUESS, AND TWO WAS CERTAINLY A BIGGER NUMBER THAN ONE. POINT IS, I WALKED TALLER, AND I SMILED MORE. I GUESS IT HELPED THAT A MONTH INTO OUR FRIENDSHIP WE WERE OLD NEWS. NOW, THAT'S NOT SAYING WE WERE COMPLETELY UNNOTICED. HOWEVER, THE RARE LOOKS THAT WE ATTRACTED FELT... DIFFERENT.
LESS CONDESCENDING AND MORE...INTRIGUED. ALLY HAD A MORE COLORFUL WAY OF INTERPRETING IT...
DUDE! I'M TELLING YOU, THEY WANT TO FUCK US!!!
DID I MENTION OUR JOKES WERE GETTING RAUNCHIER?

BY WEEK SIX, WE DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO FINALLY RAISE THINGS TO THE *NEXT LEVEL.*
AND BY THAT I MEAN, WE FOUND OUT ABOUT A SEX SHOP THAT CARRIED A STOCK OF BDSM GEAR SO WE *DOUBLE-DOG DARED* EACH OTHER TO ENTER.
YOU FIRST!
NO-NO-NO, *LADIES* FIRST!
YEAH! LIKE I SAID, YOU FIRST!
FUCK RIGHT OFF!
UGH. TOGETHER!

BE-LING
OH, HEY THERE!
MADE UP YOUR MINDS ABOUT ENTERING, THEN?
UH... YEAH.

WE'LL JUST BE... STUFF, LOOKING AT!
BROWSE!
OKAY, SO WE WERE A *LITTLE* AWKWARD ENTERING BUT... IT DIDN'T LAST LONG.
CAUSE, ONCE YOU ENTER, YOU REALIZE A SEX SHOP TENDS TO BE AN INHERENTLY *FUNNY* PLACE.

DUDE! *CO-ED SLUTS 17!*
PLEASE! *HORNY MOMS 21!*
THAT'S WHAT YOU CALL A FRANCHISE!


GOTTA LOVE HOW THEY LOOK NOTHING LIKE THE PICTURE.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? IT'S OBVIOUSLY THE SAME PERSON, JUST VERY VERY SURPRISED.

IT'S...
BEAUTIFUL!
LATER IN LIFE WE WOULD BOTH CHUCKLE AT THIS...
BUT BACK THEN...THIS WAS OUR OWN PERSONAL HOLY GROUND.
I MEAN, IT WAS THE REAL DEAL!
ACTUAL BDSM GEAR!
HEY, REMEMBER OUR TALK ABOUT DUDE FETISH GEAR SUCKING?
YYYYEEAHH!
TRUTH WAS... WE WERE GEEKING THE FUCK OUT!
HEH, GIVE ME A BUNCH OF BELTS AND SOME LEATHERWORKING TOOLS AND EVEN I COULD MAKE THIS!
CALL ME WHEN YOU CAN MAKE ONE OF THESE, AND YOU'RE HIRED!
HEH. DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH...
ALAN, IT'S A CORSET...I KINDA HAVE TO.
WHAT DO YOU THINK?
MISTRESS CARTER, OR WHAT?
OH, YEAH! THE PINK SWEATER REALLY COMPLETES THE LOOK!
HEY, FUCK YOU -- IT'S A DOMINANT PINK!
DOMINANT PINK? THAT'S A THING NOW?

SO? FOUND ANYTHING INTERESTING?
OH, HEY!
I'D LIKE TO KNOW THE PRICE OF... UH...THESE?
YEAH, ALSO A PRICE CHECK ON THIS?
AMBITIOUS!
OH, HEEEY! YOU KNOW WHAT? THIS ACTUALLY HAS A PRICE TAG ALREADY! AND...UH-HUH! THIS MAY BE A BIT *MUCH* FOR ME.
HEY, SOME ELBOW GREASE AND A LOT OF LUBE AND...
YEAH...UH, FUCK OFF, ALLY!
HAVE A NICE DAY!
YOU TOO!
YOU BOUGHT THE CONDOMS?
HEY, *SOMEONE* HAD TO BREAK THAT AWKWARD SILENCE!
HERE, YOU MAY FIND THEM USEFUL!
WITH MY REPUTATION? SURE...I COULD USE SOME WATER BALLOONS.
UHH... WHAT THE?
RIBBED, FLAVORED... GLOW-IN-THE-DARK?
GLOW JOB
OKAY, I TAKE IT ALL BACK! THESE ARE SOME SERIOUS PANTY-DROPPERS!

I HONESTLY CONSIDERED THROWING THE CONDOMS AWAY. TRUTH IS, I WAS NEVER ONE OF THOSE, "KEEP THEM HANDY AT ALL TIMES" TYPES. I JUST LACKED THAT KIND OF SHEER OPTIMISM, I GUESS.
BUT STILL, I POCKETED THEM. I GUESS I KEPT THEM BECAUSE THEY WERE FROM HER... THEY WERE OUR SCORE, AND THEY WERE FUNNY.
JUST A NICE REMINDER OF A FUN TIME TOGETHER. HEH...

ANYHOW...
IT WAS ABOUT TWO MONTHS INTO OUR FRIENDSHIP...EIGHT WEEKS HAD PASSED.
IT WAS THE DAY WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED.
CALL ME MISTRESS!

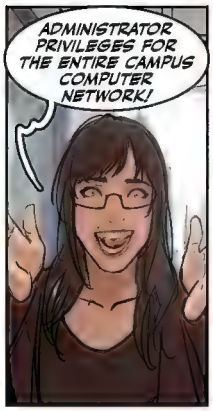
I MAY NEED SOME PERSUADING...
WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG, BY THE WAY?

YOUR FAVORITE BANDS?
FAVORITE? YES. BANDS? NOPE!

OKAY...SO, THE PROFESSOR THAT TEACHES WEB DESIGN IS ALSO IN CHARGE OF NETWORK MAINTENANCE FOR THE COLLEGE.
HE HAD TO GO OVER A BUNCH OF COMPUTERS, REPAIR INSTALLATIONS, BASIC-BUT-TEDIOUS SHIT, RIGHT?
I'LL TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT.

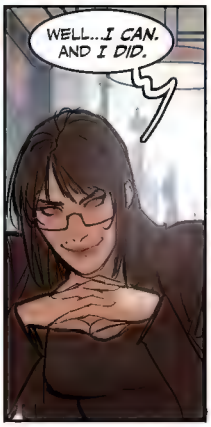
WELL...HE ASKED IF SOMEONE COULD FILL IN FOR HIM. IT WAS ACTUALLY PAID WORK. NOTHING MUCH, BUT THAT'S NOT THE GOOD PART.

I SIGNED UP... AND HE GOT ME...
...

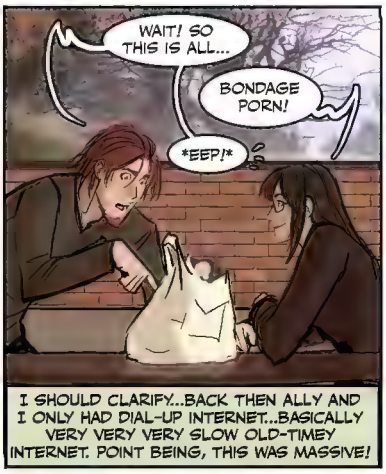

ADMINISTRATOR PRIVILEGES FOR THE ENTIRE CAMPUS COMPUTER NETWORK!

OKAY, YOU KNOW HOW YOU CAN USE THE INTERNET ON COLLEGE COMPUTERS BUT CAN'T REALLY ACCESS OR DOWNLOAD OR INSTALL ANYTHING...YOU KNOW... INTERESTING?

KHM YEAH?


WELL...I CAN. AND I DID.

OH!


WAIT! SO THIS IS ALL...
BONDAGE PORN!
EEP!
I SHOULD CLARIFY...BACK THEN ALLY AND I ONLY HAD DIAL-UP INTERNET...BASICALLY VERY VERY VERY SLOW OLD-TIMEY INTERNET. POINT BEING, THIS WAS MASSIVE!

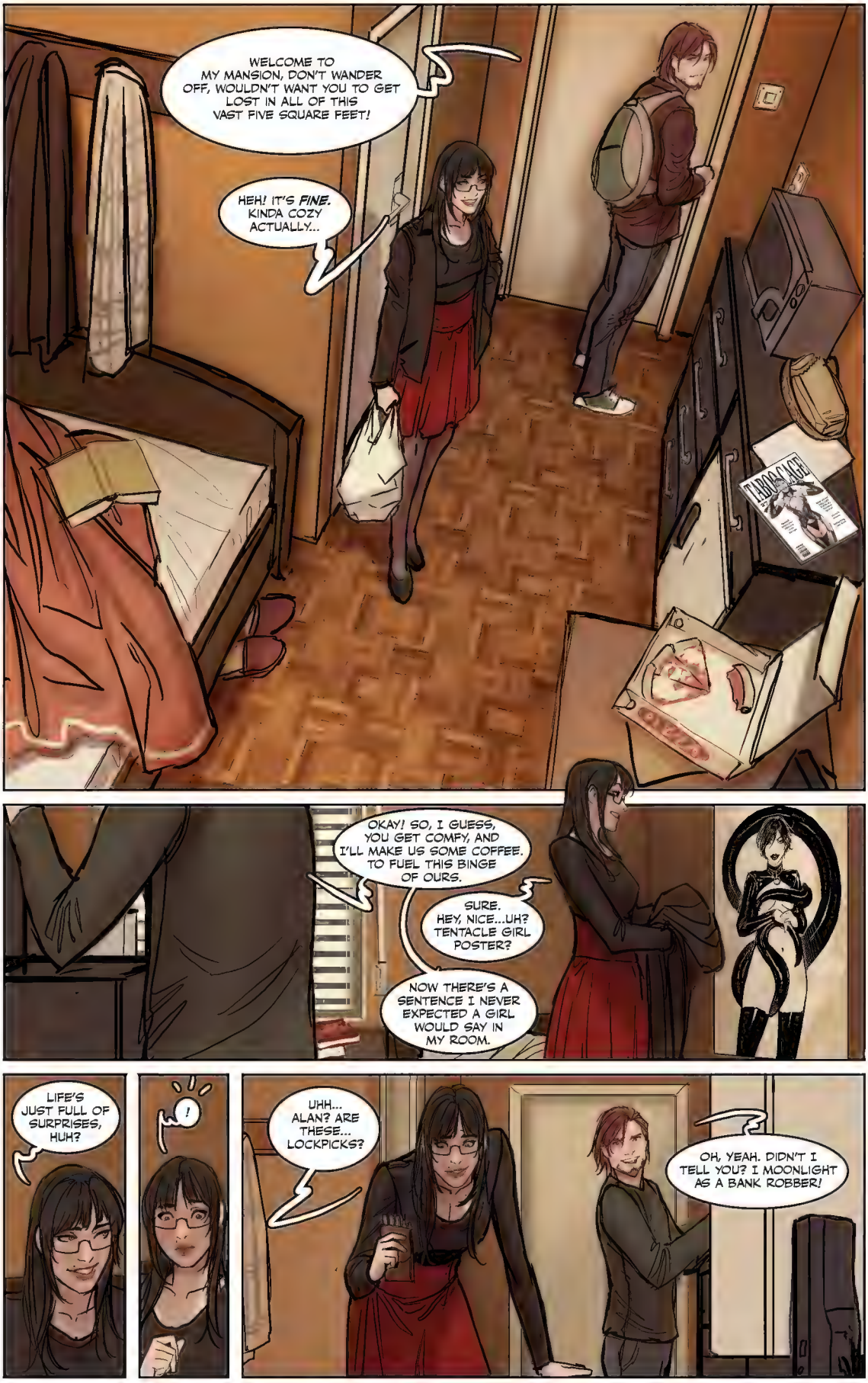
NOW...HERE IS THE PROBLEM. WE CAN'T WATCH THEM ON CAMPUS. CERTAINLY CAN'T DO IT AT MY PLACE, WHAT WITH MY MOM OR SISTER POPPING IN EVERY FEW MINUTES...

"WE"?
WE WHAT?
YOU SAID "WE" CAN'T WATCH?
YEAH! YOU, ME? POPCORN? ALL NIGHT BINGE?
YOUR PLACE?

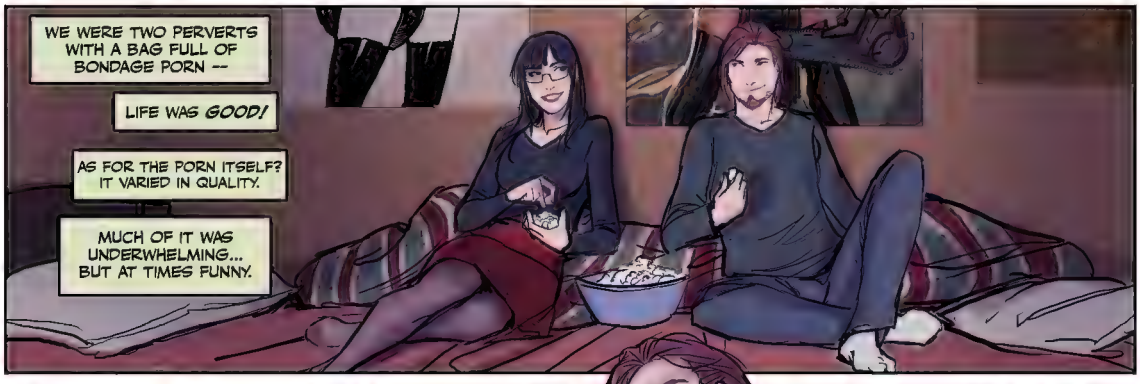
OKAY, THERE ARE TWO PROBLEMS WITH THIS...BUT...

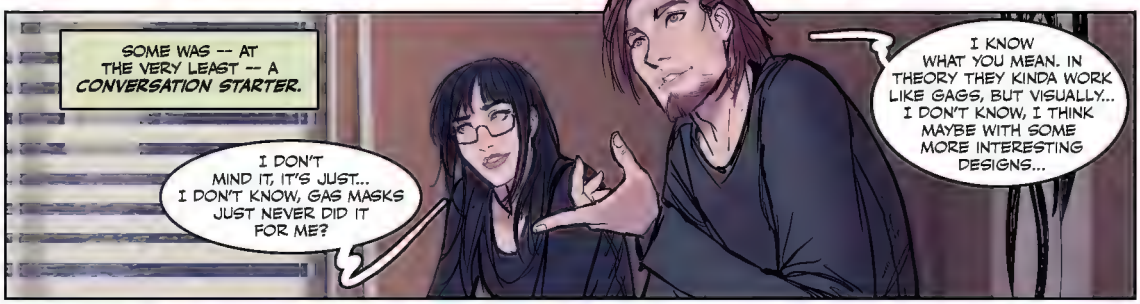
I THINK MAYBE IT'S DOABLE.

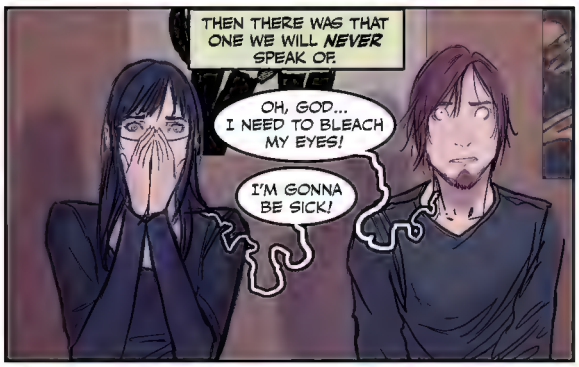
BY THE WAY, YOU WANT COFFEE OR YOU WANNA JUST GO NOW?
NAH, I'M GOOD TO GO.
SO, COME ON, SPILL IT! YOU SAID TWO PROBLEMS?
WELL, THE FIRST ONE WOULD BE, I LIVE IN THIS HOTEL-TURNED-STUDENT-HOUSING.
DUDE WHO OWNS IT HAS ONE BIG RULE FOR THE PLACE. GUYS ONLY! HE HAS PLANS FOR THE HOTEL AND DOESN'T WANT IT TO GET THE REPUTATION OF BEING AN, AS HE PUTS IT, "FRAT FUCKHOUSE!"
SO BASICALLY, WHAT I'M SAYING IS, WE'LL HAVE TO SNEAK IN.
OKAY, SO, WHAT'S THE OTHER PROBLEM?
WELL...UH... I MEAN IF WE'LL BE WATCHING FETISHIST PORN, I'LL PROBABLY END UP PITCHING A TENT...
ACTUALLY, GIVEN THE SHEER AMOUNT OF PORN HERE, IT MAY BE AN ENTIRE CAMPSITE WORTH OF TENTS, I...DON'T WANT YOU TO BE WEIRDED OUT!
FIRST OF ALL... I'VE SEEN YOUR "TENT" BEFORE!
AND, SECOND, IF THESE MOVIES ARE ANY GOOD, YOUR CAMPSITE WILL BE NEXT TO MY OWN PRIVATE LAKE SO I'M NOT JUDGING!
ONE POPCORN SHOPPING SPREE LATER...
YEAH! I'LL JUST SPEND THE NIGHT AT JENNA'S.
I KNOW, BUT IF I DO THIS ON MY COMPUTER I'LL LOSE THE WHOLE WEEKEND. JENNA'S COMPUTER IS A BEAST, SO WE'LL GET IT DONE FASTER.
EXACTLY.
OKAY. SEE YOU TOMORROW, MOM.
ALLY!
?
LET'S GO!

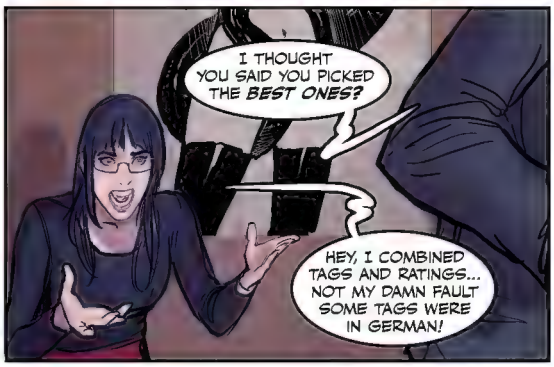

WELCOME TO MY MANSION, DON'T WANDER OFF, WOULDN'T WANT YOU TO GET LOST IN ALL OF THIS VAST FIVE SQUARE FEET!
HEH! IT'S *FINE.* KINDA COZY ACTUALLY...
OKAY! SO, I GUESS, YOU GET COMFY, AND I'LL MAKE US SOME COFFEE. TO FUEL THIS BINGE OF OURS.
SURE. HEY, NICE...UH? TENTACLE GIRL POSTER?
NOW THERE'S A SENTENCE I NEVER EXPECTED A GIRL WOULD SAY IN MY ROOM.
LIFE'S JUST FULL OF SURPRISES, HUH?
!
UHH... ALAN? ARE THESE... LOCKPICKS?
OH, YEAH. DIDN'T I TELL YOU? I MOONLIGHT AS A BANK ROBBER!

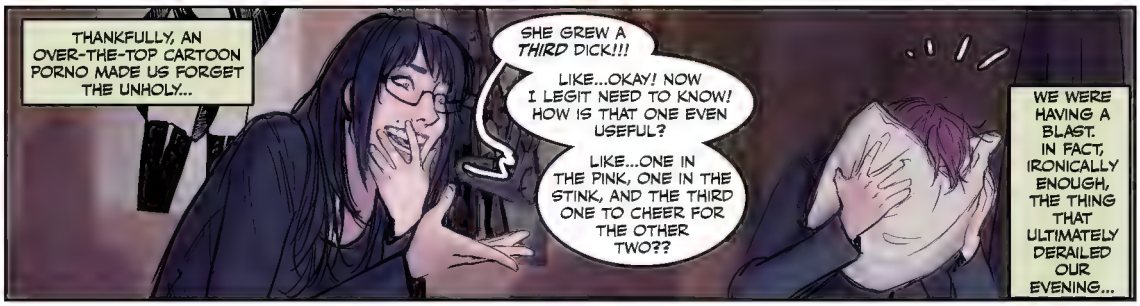
YOU LITTLE BITCH! AND YOU HAD ME PAYING FOR YOUR BURGER ON TUESDAY!
FOR REAL, THOUGH! WHAT'S WITH THE THIEF KIT?
WELL, I USED TO HELP MY MOM AND DAD DO RESTORATIONS FOR THEIR ANTIQUE SHOP.
THEY TAUGHT ME HOW TO PICK AND REPLACE OLD LOCKS ON CHESTS AND FURNITURE.
KINDA WHY I PICKED ART AND ART HISTORY COURSES.
PLANNED ON CARRYING ON THE FAMILY BUSINESS.
IN FACT, WHEN I MOVED HERE FOR COLLEGE I FOUND A PART TIME JOB AT A NEARBY ANTIQUE STORE.
I MOSTLY DO THE SAME THING...
I DO MISS WORKING WITH MY FOLKS THOUGH...
SO WHY DID YOU MOVE ALL THE WAY HERE?
I MEAN, YOU SEEM TO BE COOL WITH YOUR PARENTS.
AND OUR COMMUNITY COLLEGE HARDLY SEEMS WORTH THE HASSLE.
MY OLD MAN'S IDEA. HE INSISTED I SHOULD "SEE THE WORLD" AND "GET A FEEL FOR LIFE ON MY OWN."
SO HERE I AM.
STILL...GOT TO MEET YOU, SO THANKS, DAD!
WHAT ABOUT YOU? I KNOW YOU LIVE WITH YOUR MOM.
AND AN OLDER SISTER. DAD DIED FOUR YEARS AGO.
OH...
SORRY...
YEAH. ANYHOW, I DON'T KNOW...MY MOM IS GREAT AND ALL. I LOVE HER TO BITS, IT'S JUST...EVER SINCE MY DAD, Y'KNOW...SHE'S BEEN LIKE, SUPER OBSSESSIVE WITH MARY AND ME. LIKE, COMPLETE HELICOPTER PARENT. AND NOW MARY IS 21 SO SHE GETS OFF THE HOOK, AND I USUALLY GET MOM'S FULL ATTENTION.
AND THAT'S NOT A VERY CONVENIENT THING WHEN YOU ARE INTO... Y'KNOW...OUR KIND OF STUFF.
THE FUNNY THING IS, MY SISTER FIGURED ME OUT A FEW YEARS AGO.
AH, YES. THE NIGHTMARE SCENARIO.
HEH...IT WASN'T THAT BAD. STILL... I LEARNED MY LESSON.
STARTED PASSWORD LOCKING MY PORN. CAUSE THESE DAYS, MY MOM USES MY COMPUTER OCCASIONALLY, AND THAT'S AN AWKWARD CONVERSATION I DON'T WANT TO HAVE. LIKE...EVER!
WAIT! HOLD EVERYTHING! YOU HAVE *COMPUTER PORN?!* I AM SHOCKED AND APPALLED AND...
HEY! RIGHT HERE, BUDDY!
HEH!
SO, WHAT KIND OF STUFF DO YOU HOARD? I DO PHOTOS.
WRITTEN STORIES. EASY TO HIDE AND JUST AS HOT.
I GUESS WE'RE BOTH ABOUT TO UPGRADE, THEN.
SO? WHERE DO WE START?


WE WERE TWO PERVERTS WITH A BAG FULL OF BONDAGE PORN --
LIFE WAS GOOD!
AS FOR THE PORN ITSELF? IT VARIED IN QUALITY.
MUCH OF IT WAS UNDERWHELMING... BUT AT TIMES FUNNY.

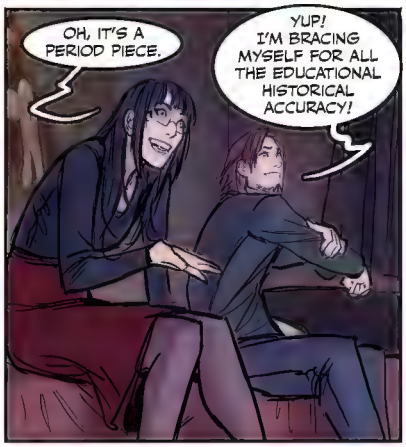

SOME WAS -- AT THE VERY LEAST -- A CONVERSATION STARTER.
I DON'T MIND IT, IT'S JUST... I DON'T KNOW, GAS MASKS JUST NEVER DID IT FOR ME?
I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN. IN THEORY THEY KINDA WORK LIKE GAGS, BUT VISUALLY... I DON'T KNOW, I THINK MAYBE WITH SOME MORE INTERESTING DESIGNS...

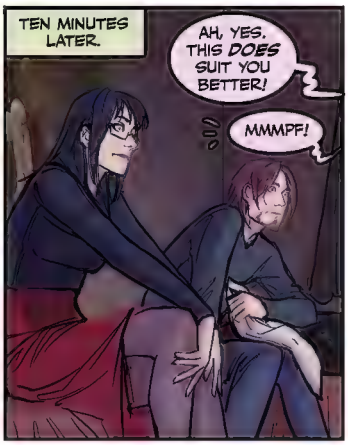

THEN THERE WAS THAT ONE WE WILL NEVER SPEAK OF.
OH, GOD... I NEED TO BLEACH MY EYES!
I'M GONNA BE SICK!

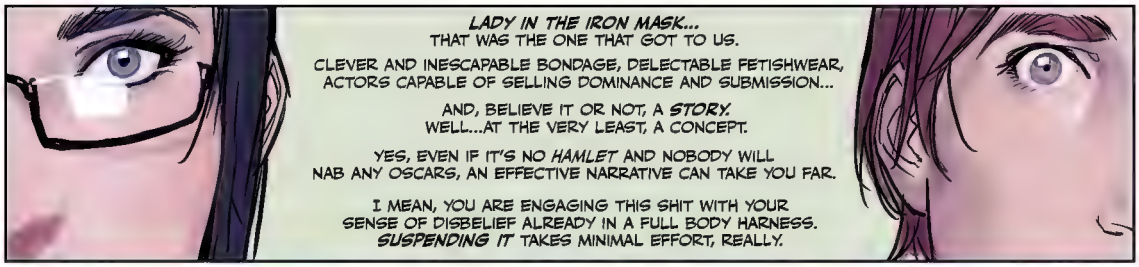

I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU PICKED THE BEST ONES?
HEY, I COMBINED TAGS AND RATINGS... NOT MY DAMN FAULT SOME TAGS WERE IN GERMAN!


THANKFULLY, AN OVER-THE-TOP CARTOON PORNO MADE US FORGET THE UNHOLY...
SHE GREW A THIRD DICK!!!
LIKE...OKAY! NOW I LEGIT NEED TO KNOW! HOW IS THAT ONE EVEN USEFUL?
LIKE...ONE IN THE PINK, ONE IN THE STINK, AND THE THIRD ONE TO CHEER FOR THE OTHER TWO??
WE WERE HAVING A BLAST. IN FACT, IRONICALLY ENOUGH, THE THING THAT ULTIMATELY DERAILED OUR EVENING...

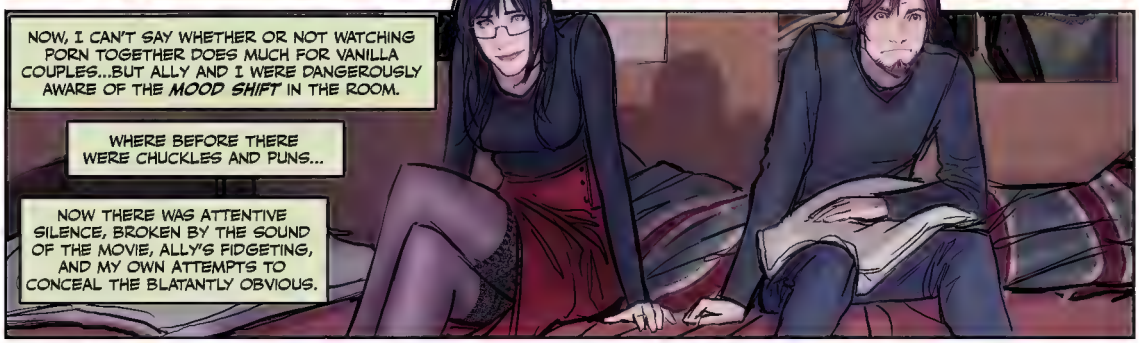
...WAS SOME LEGITIMATELY GREAT PORN.
WHICH ONE IS THIS?
IT SAYS: LADY IN THE IRON MASK.

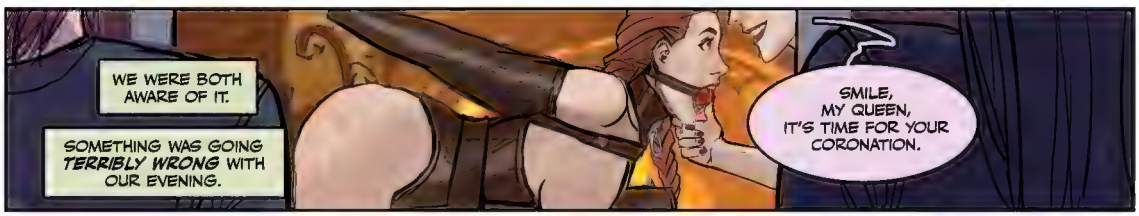

OH, IT'S A PERIOD PIECE.
YUP! I'M BRACING MYSELF FOR ALL THE EDUCATIONAL HISTORICAL ACCURACY!

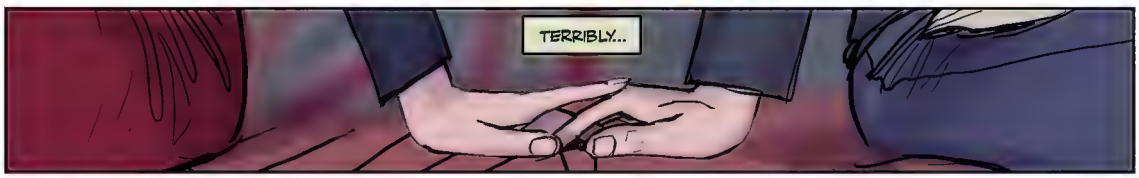

TEN MINUTES LATER.
AH, YES. THIS DOES SUIT YOU BETTER!
MMMPF!

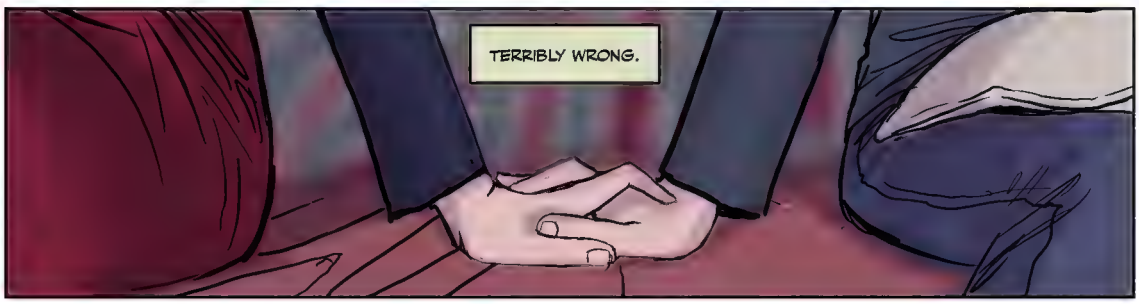

LADY IN THE IRON MASK...
THAT WAS THE ONE THAT GOT TO US.
CLEVER AND INESCAPABLE BONDAGE, DELECTABLE FETISHWEAR, ACTORS CAPABLE OF SELLING DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION...
AND, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, A STORY. WELL...AT THE VERY LEAST, A CONCEPT.
YES, EVEN IF IT'S NO HAMLET AND NOBODY WILL NAB ANY OSCARS, AN EFFECTIVE NARRATIVE CAN TAKE YOU FAR.
I MEAN, YOU ARE ENGAGING THIS SHIT WITH YOUR SENSE OF DISBELIEF ALREADY IN A FULL BODY HARNESS. SUSPENDING IT TAKES MINIMAL EFFORT, REALLY.

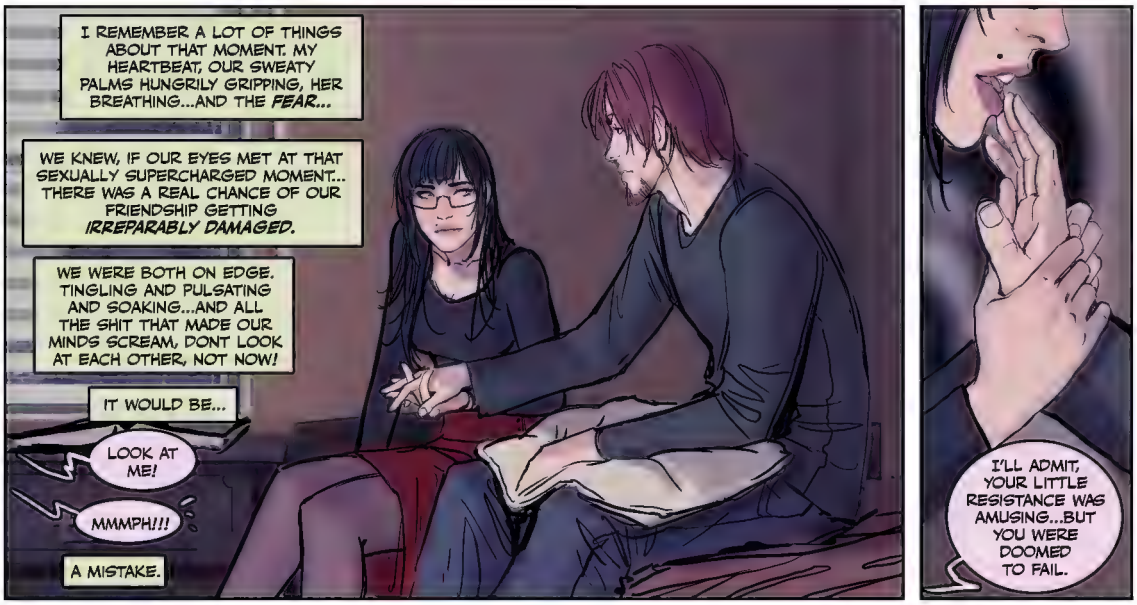
AND THIS DAMNED THING NOT ONLY SUSPENDED OUR DISBELIEF BUT POURED HOT WAX ALL OVER IT AND HAD IT BEGGING FOR MORE.
MMMNF!
OH, COME NOW, YOUR MAJESTY. YOUR SISTER WILL TAKE GOOD CARE OF THE THRONE.
AND LOOK, YOU STILL GET TO WEAR A FETCHING CROWN FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.

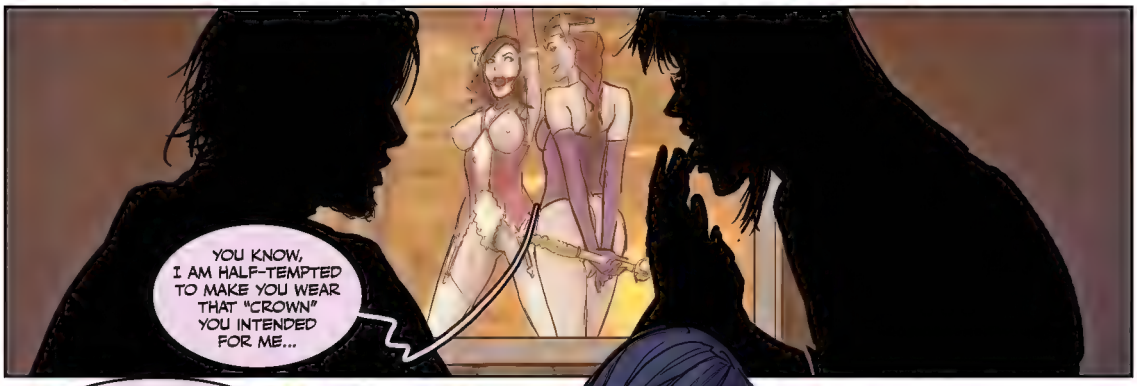

NOW, I CAN'T SAY WHETHER OR NOT WATCHING PORN TOGETHER DOES MUCH FOR VANILLA COUPLES...BUT ALLY AND I WERE DANGEROUSLY AWARE OF THE MOOD SHIFT IN THE ROOM.
WHERE BEFORE THERE WERE CHUCKLES AND PUNS...
NOW THERE WAS ATTENTIVE SILENCE, BROKEN BY THE SOUND OF THE MOVIE, ALLY'S FIDGETING, AND MY OWN ATTEMPTS TO CONCEAL THE BLATANTLY OBVIOUS.

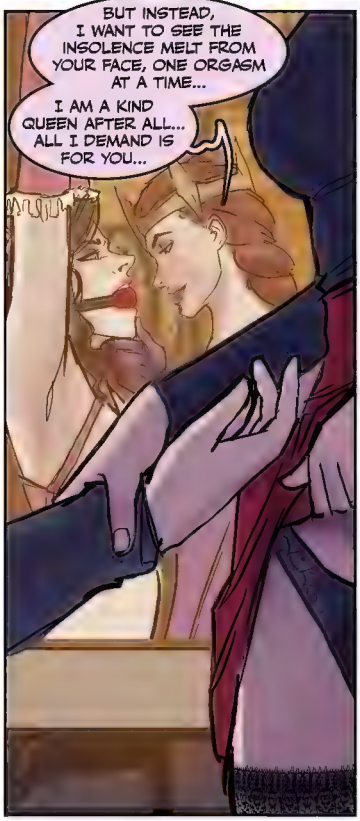

WE WERE BOTH AWARE OF IT.
SOMETHING WAS GOING TERRIBLY WRONG WITH OUR EVENING.
SMILE, MY QUEEN, IT'S TIME FOR YOUR CORONATION.


TERRIBLY...


TERRIBLY WRONG.


I REMEMBER A LOT OF THINGS ABOUT THAT MOMENT. MY HEARTBEAT, OUR SWEATY PALMS HUNGRILY GRIPPING, HER BREATHING...AND THE *FEAR...*
WE KNEW, IF OUR EYES MET AT THAT SEXUALLY SUPERCHARGED MOMENT... THERE WAS A REAL CHANCE OF OUR FRIENDSHIP GETTING *IRREPARABLY DAMAGED.*
WE WERE BOTH ON EDGE. TINGLING AND PULSATING AND SOAKING...AND ALL THE SHIT THAT MADE OUR MINDS SCREAM, DONT LOOK AT EACH OTHER, NOT NOW!
IT WOULD BE...
LOOK AT ME!
MMMPH!!!
A MISTAKE.
I'LL ADMIT, YOUR LITTLE RESISTANCE WAS AMUSING...BUT YOU WERE DOOMED TO FAIL.

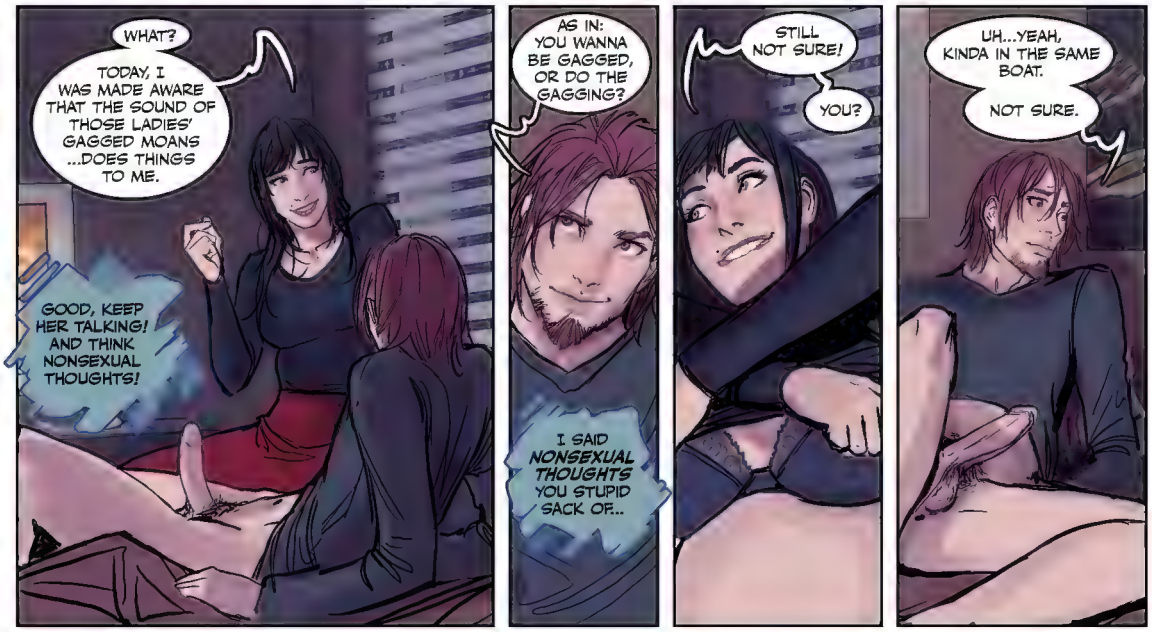

YOU KNOW, I AM HALF-TEMPTED TO MAKE YOU WEAR THAT "CROWN" YOU INTENDED FOR ME...


BUT INSTEAD, I WANT TO SEE THE INSOLENCE MELT FROM YOUR FACE, ONE ORGASM AT A TIME...
I AM A KIND QUEEN AFTER ALL... ALL I DEMAND IS FOR YOU...

TO *WORSHIP* ME.

ALLY?
SSH, PLEASE, DON'T SPEAK -- I WANT TO HEAR HER MOAN. JUST...JUST DIG INTO ME...
MNNNUH!
YES!
I KEPT QUIET.
MMH!
MMNH!
MMNH!
HMPH!
MMMNH!
MMH!
MMH!
MMMMWAH!
FOR A WHILE, THE ONLY SOUND IN THE ROOM WAS THE MOANING OF THE GAGGED ACTRESS ALMOST SYNCHRONIZED WITH ALLY'S OWN SUPPRESSED MOANS.
ROUGHER! MNNH... DIG... DEEPER.
AND SO I DID.
I FELT HER GRIP ON ME GROW STRONGER, MORE... DESPERATE.
MY ARM STRAINED AS ALLY TWISTED AROUND, NEARING CLIMAX. BUT I KEPT DIGGING INSIDE HER...
AT THE SAME TIME, HER LEG WOULD EVERY NOW AND THEN PRESS ON THE PILLOW IN MY LAP —
NOT ENOUGH TO GET ME THERE, BUT DAMN IF IT DIDN'T SHOW ME THE NEIGHBORHOOD...
AND THEN ALLY LOCKED UP HER WHOLE BODY, A SPASM. HER GRIP AROUND MY FINGERS, A VICE...
HER ONLY MOVEMENT, A REPEATED SHUDDER.
A SUPPRESSED SERIES OF DEEP EXPLOSIONS, EACH FOLLOWED BY A SWIFT MOAN.

AND THEN... SILENCE.
I REMEMBER LUCIDITY CRAWLING BACK INTO MY MIND.
REMEMBER GENTLY REMOVING MY HAND --
SHE FINALLY LOOKED AT ME ONCE AGAIN...
AND THAT WAS WHEN I GOT REALLY NERVOUS.
HUFF YOU ARE GOOD *HUFF* WITH YOUR HANDS.
WHAT DO I DO NOW?
SAY SOMETHING!!!
WELL... TECHNICALLY, I'M GOOD AT LOCKPICKING.
AAAAAAARGHH!!!
OKAY.. UH...THAT CAME OFF WEIRD.
JUST... SHUT IT, ALAN!
WE'RE NOT DONE YET.
ANNND THEN SHE DITCHED THE PILLOW, AND IN MY OVERSTIMULATED STATE, I REALIZED I HAD A BIG PROBLEM. I WAS TWO GOOD STROKES AWAY FROM HAVING AN ACCIDENT.
OH SHIT!
OH SHIT!!!
OH, THIS IS BAD!!!
SHE IS TOUCHING...OKAY! BASEBALL GAMES BEING NARRATED BY MY OLD HISTORY TEACHER!...WHILE HAVING SEX WITH MY OLD MATH TEACHER! DRESSED AS OLD CLOWNS!!!
OH! HI, ALAN'S PENIS!
SO HERE'S WHAT I'M GONNA DO. I'LL REWIND THAT VIDEO, TURN OFF THE SCREEN, AND THEN I AM GOING TO LISTEN BOTH HER AND YOU MOAN... AS I RIDE YOU.
THAT OKAY WITH YOU?
LISTEN, BRAIN, WE'VE GOT AN URGENT MESSAGE FROM PENIS! IF SHE TOUCHES US THERE NOW, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE A MESS!
STALL HER!!!!
OWH... KAY...I MEAN THAT IS...
I'M COOL WITH THAT... EXTREMELY SPECIFIC PLAN.

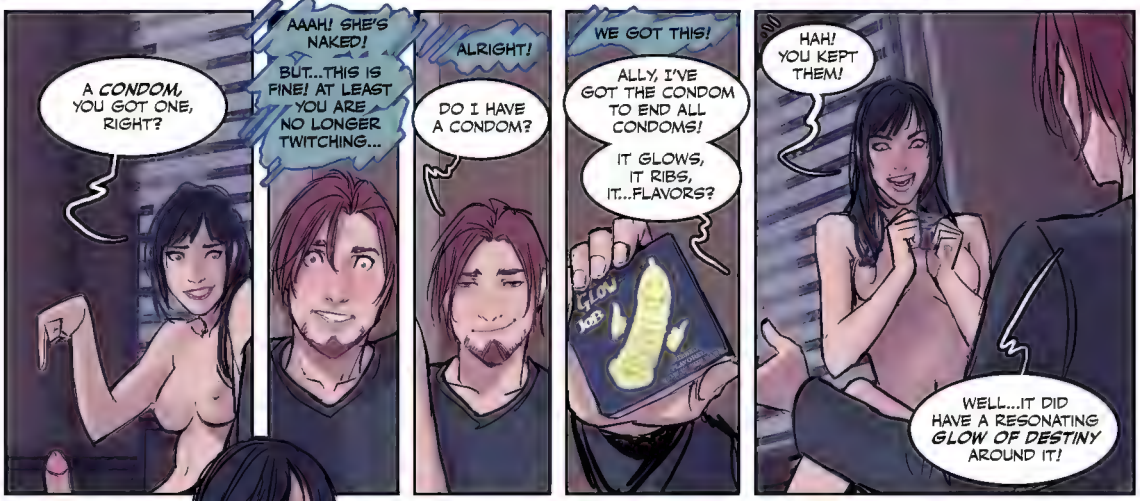


WEIRDLY ENOUGH, WE WERE BOTH *LYING*. IT WAS A STRANGE THING TO BE EMBARRASSED ABOUT AT THE MOMENT, BUT THERE WE WERE. BOTH FULL OF SHIT. WE EACH SAMPLED THE TASTE OF DOMINANCE THAT NIGHT AND FOUND THE FLAVOR APPEALING.

SHE TOOK INITIATIVE, GUIDED ME, MADE ME PLEASURE HER.

AND ME...I HAD HER SATISFACTION IN THE PALM OF MY HAND. EVERY MOVE I MADE WAS MET WITH HER RESPONSE... SHE WAS A DELICATE INSTRUMENT IN MY HAND AND I HAD THE CONTROL...AND SHE SAID..."NO..."SHE ASKED FOR ME TO BE ROUGHER, TO DIG DEEPER.

TRUTH WAS, BETWEEN ***DOMINANT*** AND ***SUBMISSIVE,*** BOTH OF US ALREADY PREFERRED BEING A...

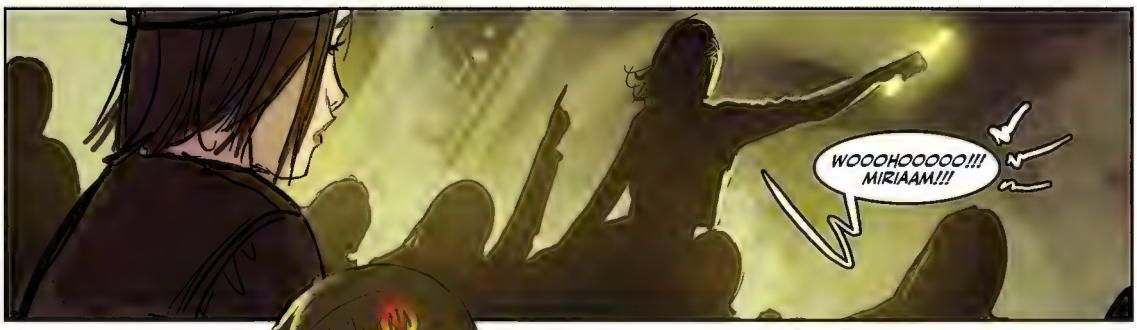


CLICK

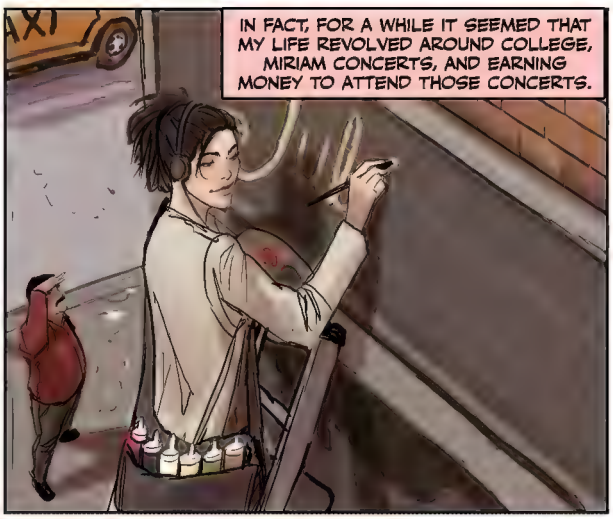
PFFFT!
OKAY, THAT'S JUST TRIPPY!
HEHEH! HEY, ALAN?
WHAT?

FWOOOM! FWOOOOM!
DAMN IT, A--A-A-...
AND SO, WITH THE SOUNDS OF ALLY MIMICKING A LIGHTSABER, OUR EIGHT WEEKS OF PURE FRIENDSHIP CAME TO AN END.
COINCIDENTALLY, SO DID I -- BUT THAT'S BESIDE THE POINT...

POINT IS, THAT NIGHT, SOMETHING NEW BEGAN.
SOMETHING CRAZY...
SOMETHING WILD...
SOMETHING...
AWESOMEEEE!!!!


WOOOHOOOOO!!! MIRIAAM!!!

OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE. WHO BRINGS GLOWSTICKS TO A METAL CONCERT?

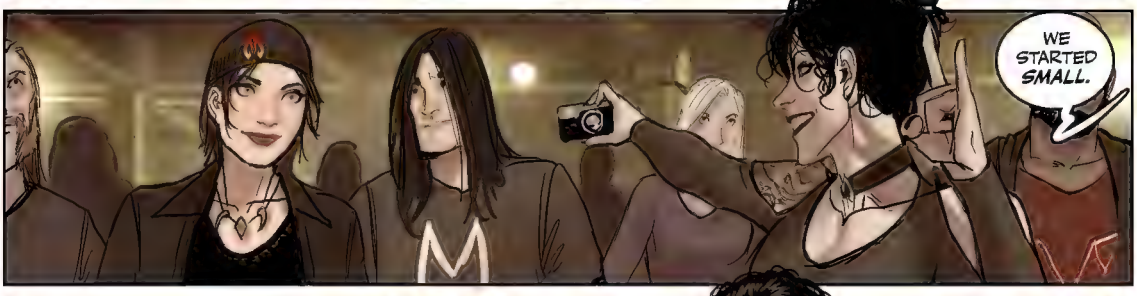


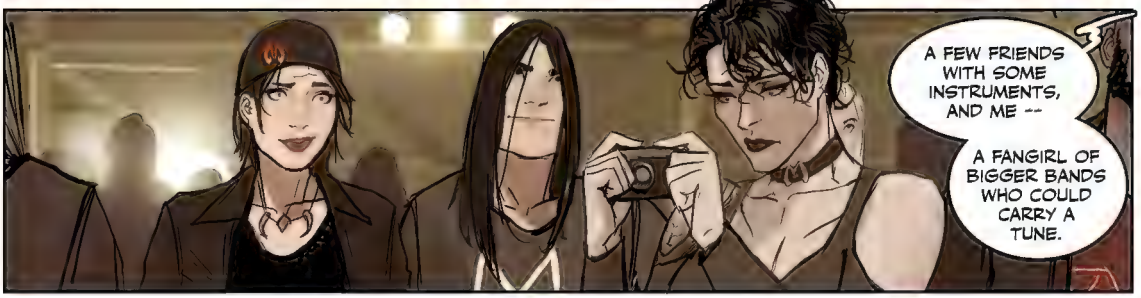
THAT WAS FINE WITH ME. IF MIRIAM WAS SINGING, I WAS GONNA BE THERE. AS IT TURNED OUT, THERE WERE OTHERS THAT SHARED MY SENTIMENT.

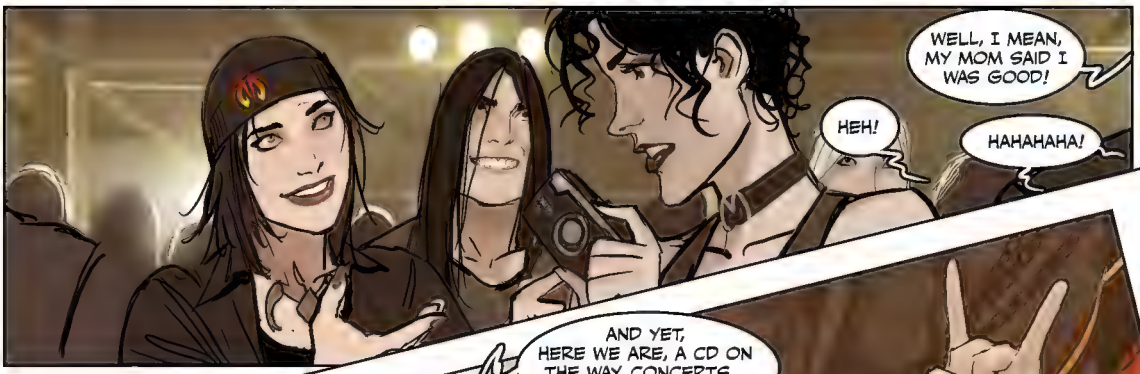
SOME OF THEM I SAW SO OFTEN THAT I ULTIMATELY GAVE THEM NICKNAMES.

ALRIGHT, I SEE SOME FAMILIAR FACES HERE!
I DIDN'T KNOW LAURA YET...
MIRIAM, MARRY ME!!!
BUT, YOU KNOW WHAT? I KINDA WANTED TO.

BEFORE WE SET THIS STAGE ON FIRE, I'D LIKE TO SAY A FEW THINGS.

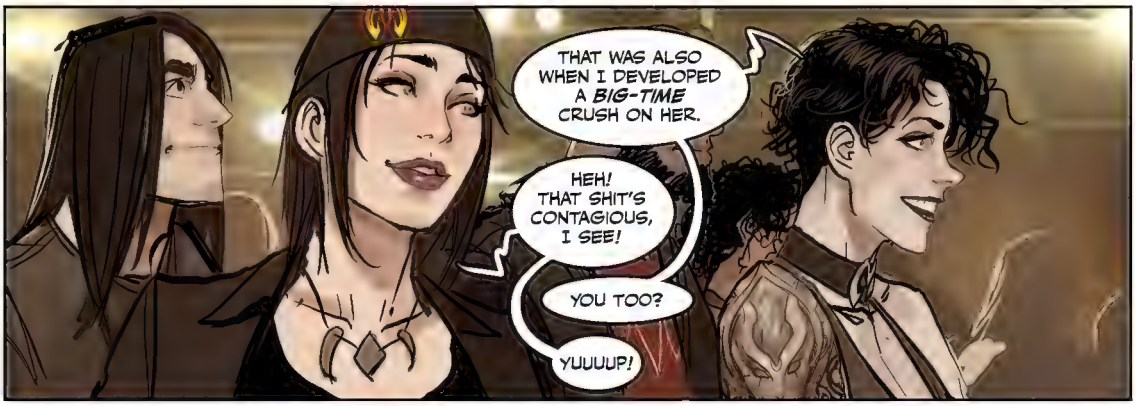

WE STARTED SMALL.

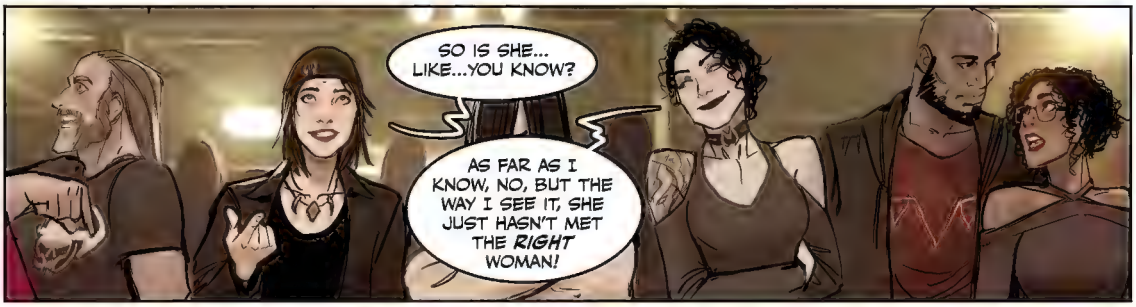

A FEW FRIENDS WITH SOME INSTRUMENTS, AND ME --
A FANGIRL OF BIGGER BANDS WHO COULD CARRY A TUNE.


WELL, I MEAN, MY MOM SAID I WAS GOOD!
HEH!
HAHAHAHA!

AND YET, HERE WE ARE, A CD ON THE WAY, CONCERTS... THE WORKS!
AND WE OWE IT ALL TO YOU!

AND FOR THAT, I WANT TO THANK YOU!
AND I GUESS THE BEST WAY WE CAN DO THAT IS BY DOING THE THING!
SO, YOU BEEN A FAN O...
OKAY, I KNOW WHAT THAT LOOKED LIKE...
BUT I SWEAR, I WAS ADMIRING YOUR TATTOO!
MHM.
NO, REALLY, I AM A MASSIVE FAN OF THE BAND! YOU GOT ME BEAT.
HEH, THANK YOU. YEAH I WAS INTO HER WHEN I FIRST MET HER THREE YEARS AGO IN THIS TINY METAL CLUB.


THAT WAS ALSO WHEN I DEVELOPED A BIG-TIME CRUSH ON HER.
HEH! THAT SHIT'S CONTAGIOUS, I SEE!
YOU TOO?
YUUUUP!


SO IS SHE... LIKE...YOU KNOW?
AS FAR AS I KNOW, NO, BUT THE WAY I SEE IT, SHE JUST HASN'T MET THE RIGHT WOMAN!

OH, AND I PRESUME YOU'D BE THE RIGHT WOMAN?
YOU BET YOUR ASS!
NOW, I KNOW SOME OF YOU KNOW THIS SONG!

WELL, I MAY JUST HAVE TO FIGHT YOU ON THAT ONE!
AWWW! YOU'RE CUTE! WHAT'S YOUR NAME?
A SONG ABOUT A SPECIAL GIRL!

A GIRL CALLED...
MARIANNE!!!
...BUT I USUALLY GO BY ANNE!
YOU'RE SHITTING ME?

NO, REALLY! MY NAME IS...
MARIANNE
...OF MY DARK HEART!
I REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN WE HOWLED AT THE NIGHT --

SHE SOUNDS KINDA AWESOME!
YYYUP!
ALSO...SOUNDS LIKE THE TWO OF YOU REALLY HIT IT OFF. SOOO? DID YOU GET HER NUMBER?
OH, I GOT HER NUMBER...

AS YOU NOTICED, WE WERE HITTING IT OFF, SO I FIGURED, CARPE DIEM AND ALL THAT. I'M GOING ALL IN!
COME ON, I'LL BUY YOU A DRINK.
AND TO MY RELIEF SHE SAID:
YEAH, WHY NOT?
I WAS ON TOP OF THE WORLD!
HEY, BUDDY! CAN WE GET TWO BEERS OVER HERE?
AND THEN I TRIPPED...
I'M GONNA NEED TO SEE SOME ID FIRST!
PFFFFFT BWAHAHAHAHHAHAHAH
LAUGH IT UP, RED.

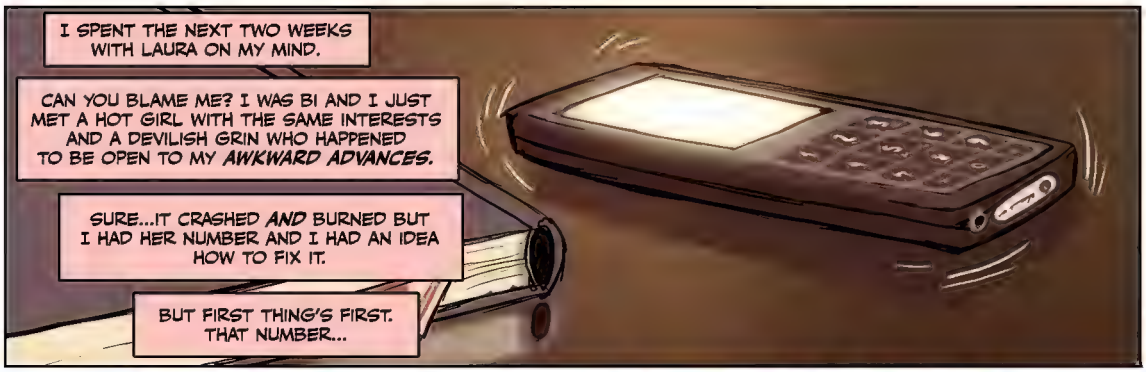
UGH! ALL THOSE CONCERTS AND I NEVER HAD ANYONE ASK ME FOR MY ID. THE ONE TIME I NEED TO IMPRESS SOMEONE, I GET DUDLEY-FUCKING-DO-RIGHT TENDING THE BAR!
I BET THAT DIDN'T GO OVER TOO WELL.

YOU THINK???
LISTEN, KID...
I'M NOT A KID!
RIGHT, UHH...YOU'RE CUTE AND ALL, BUT I'M 22. I'M NOT MESSING WITH ANY JAILBAIT!

JAIL... I'M NINETEEN!
RIGHT...HERE'S MY PHONE NUMBER. I DON'T KNOW...

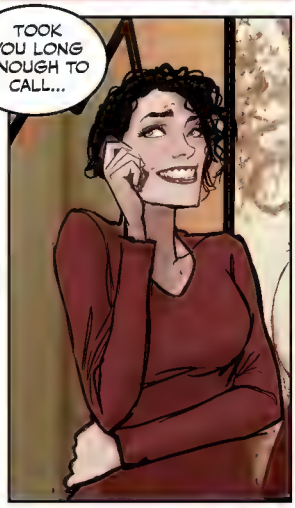
I GUESS, CALL ME WHEN YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO BUY ME SOMETHING STRONGER THAN A CUP OF COCOA...
OKAY?

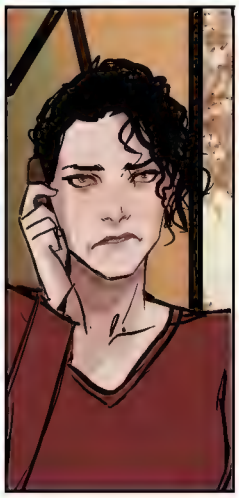
SO, YEAH...I GOT HER NUMBER.
PFFFFFFFFFFFTTTT


I SPENT THE NEXT TWO WEEKS WITH LAURA ON MY MIND.
CAN YOU BLAME ME? I WAS BI AND I JUST MET A HOT GIRL WITH THE SAME INTERESTS AND A DEVILISH GRIN WHO HAPPENED TO BE OPEN TO MY *AWKWARD ADVANCES.*
SURE...IT CRASHED *AND* BURNED BUT I HAD HER NUMBER AND I HAD AN IDEA HOW TO FIX IT.
BUT FIRST THING'S FIRST. THAT NUMBER...

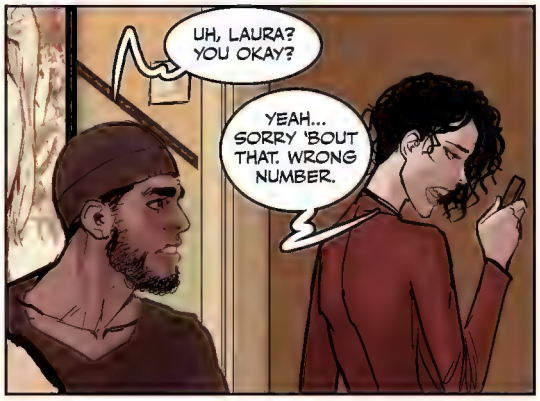
LAURA, YOUR CELL--
GOT IT!

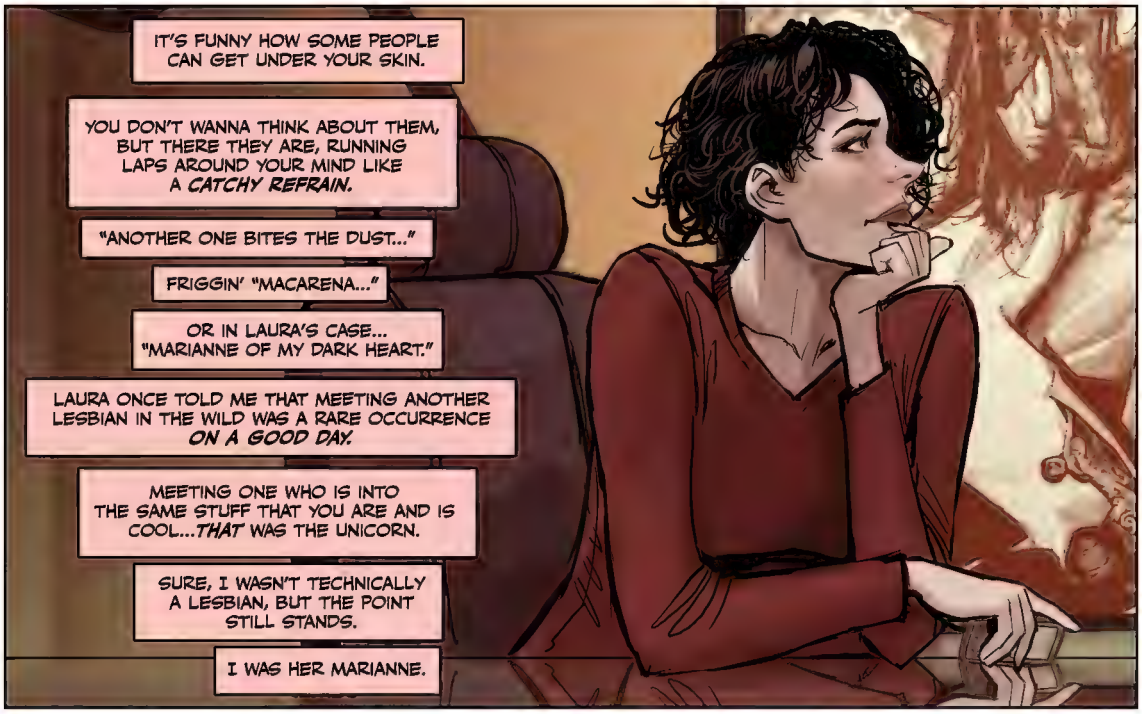
UNKNOWN NUMBER...
HEH!


TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH TO CALL...

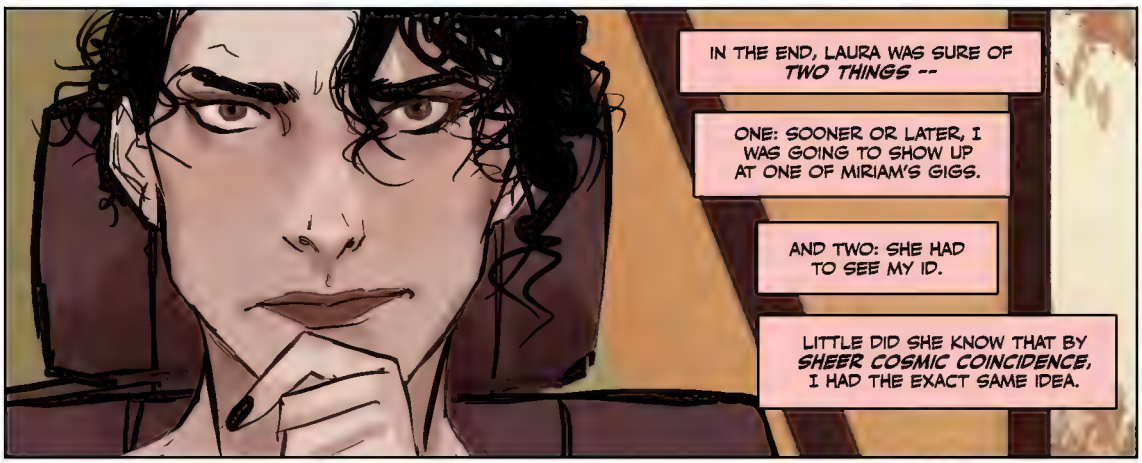


I'M NOT SWITCHING TO YOUR SERVICE! NOW FUCK OFF *FOREVER!*

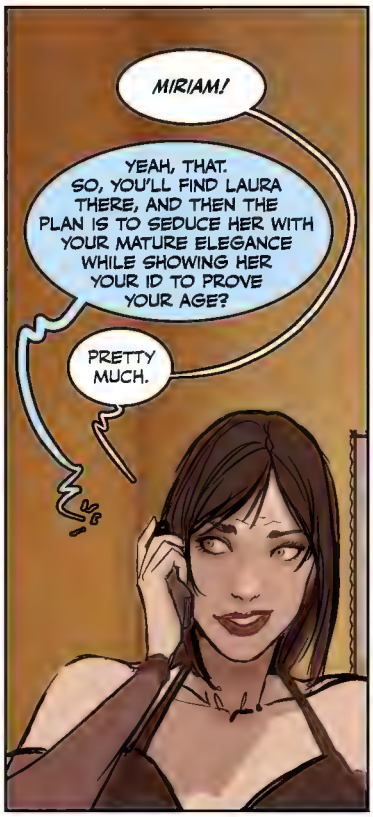

UH, LAURA? YOU OKAY?
YEAH... SORRY 'BOUT THAT. WRONG NUMBER.

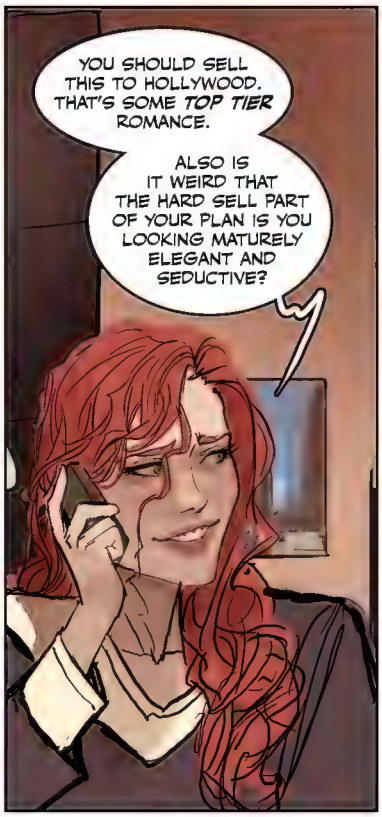

IT'S FUNNY HOW SOME PEOPLE CAN GET UNDER YOUR SKIN.
YOU DON'T WANNA THINK ABOUT THEM, BUT THERE THEY ARE, RUNNING LAPS AROUND YOUR MIND LIKE A *CATCHY REFRAIN.*
"ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST..."
FRIGGIN' "MACARENA..."
OR IN LAURA'S CASE... "MARIANNE OF MY DARK HEART."
LAURA ONCE TOLD ME THAT MEETING ANOTHER LESBIAN IN THE WILD WAS A RARE OCCURRENCE *ON A GOOD DAY.*
MEETING ONE WHO IS INTO THE SAME STUFF THAT YOU ARE AND IS COOL...*THAT* WAS THE UNICORN.
SURE, I WASN'T TECHNICALLY A LESBIAN, BUT THE POINT STILL STANDS.
I WAS HER MARIANNE.

THE TRUTH WAS, HER TEASING ASIDE, WHEN SHE GAVE ME HER CELL PHONE NUMBER, SHE DID SO IN EARNEST.
SHE *HOPED* I WOULD CALL...
SHE WANTED ME TO CALL.
IN FACT, SHE WOULD HAVE ASKED FOR MY NUMBER IN RETURN IF IT WASN'T FOR THE ONE BIG PROBLEM.
SEE, WHILE I TOLD HER I WAS IN FACT NINETEEN, I HAD NO ID ON ME TO PROVE IT.
NOW, I WAS OBVIOUSLY WILLING TO LIE ABOUT MY AGE TO GET A DRINK. IT WASN'T MUCH OF A STRETCH TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY THAT I MIGHT DO SO FOR...OTHER TYPES OF PLEASURES.


IN THE END, LAURA WAS SURE OF *TWO THINGS* --
ONE: SOONER OR LATER, I WAS GOING TO SHOW UP AT ONE OF MIRIAM'S GIGS.
AND TWO: SHE HAD TO SEE MY ID.
LITTLE DID SHE KNOW THAT BY *SHEER COSMIC COINCIDENCE,* I HAD THE EXACT SAME IDEA.

AND YOU THINK SHE BAILED ON YOU BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T HAVE YOUR ID?
I MEAN, SHE WASN'T REALLY SUBTLE ABOUT IT. AND I'M PRETTY SURE I KNOW WHERE SHE'LL BE TONIGHT!
SOOO...YOU'LL TO GO TO THIS CONCERT OF UH... MARY'S?


MIRIAM!
YEAH, THAT. SO, YOU'LL FIND LAURA THERE, AND THEN THE PLAN IS TO SEDUCE HER WITH YOUR MATURE ELEGANCE WHILE SHOWING HER YOUR ID TO PROVE YOUR AGE?
PRETTY MUCH.


YOU SHOULD SELL THIS TO HOLLYWOOD. THAT'S SOME TOP TIER ROMANCE.
ALSO IS IT WEIRD THAT THE HARD SELL PART OF YOUR PLAN IS YOU LOOKING MATURELY ELEGANT AND SEDUCTIVE?

HEY, FUCK YOU! I CAN BE ELEGANT AND SEDUCTIVE!
YOU WEARING YOUR ARMY BOOTS AGAIN?

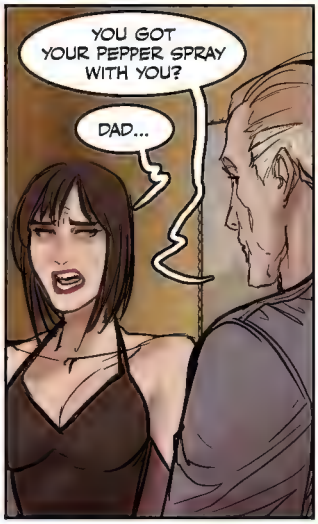
UGH... SCREW IT!
MARIANNE, YOU GOT A LETTER FROM...
UH?
YOU DOING OKAY THERE? YOU'RE NOT GONNA SPRAIN YOUR ANKLE AGAIN?
HEY, I'VE GOTTEN BETTER AT THIS SINCE COUSIN BESSIE'S WEDDING!
A LITTLE BETTER!

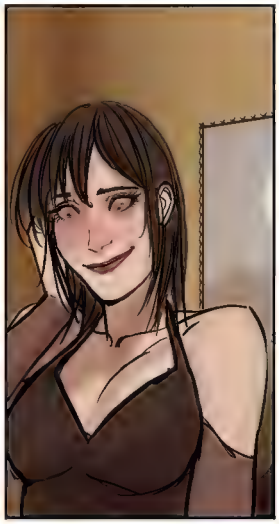
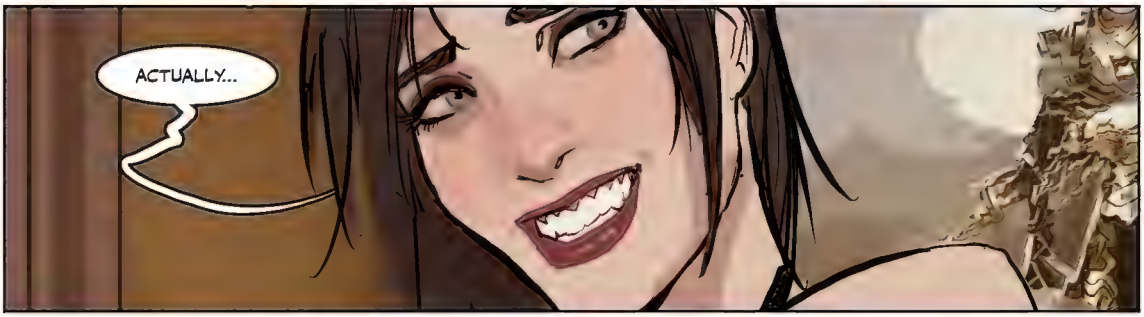
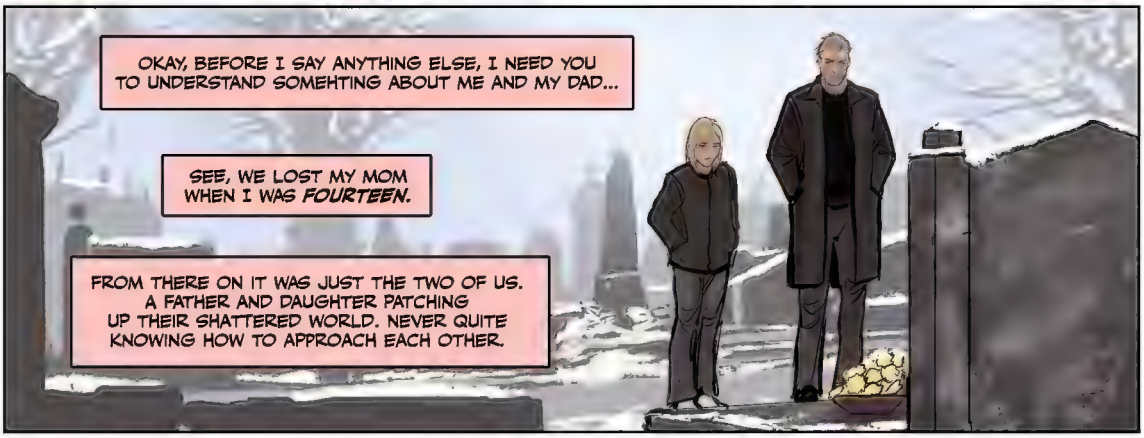
IF IT'S ANY COMFORT, YOUR MOM HATED THEM AS WELL.

HEH... THAT ACTUALLY DOES HELP.

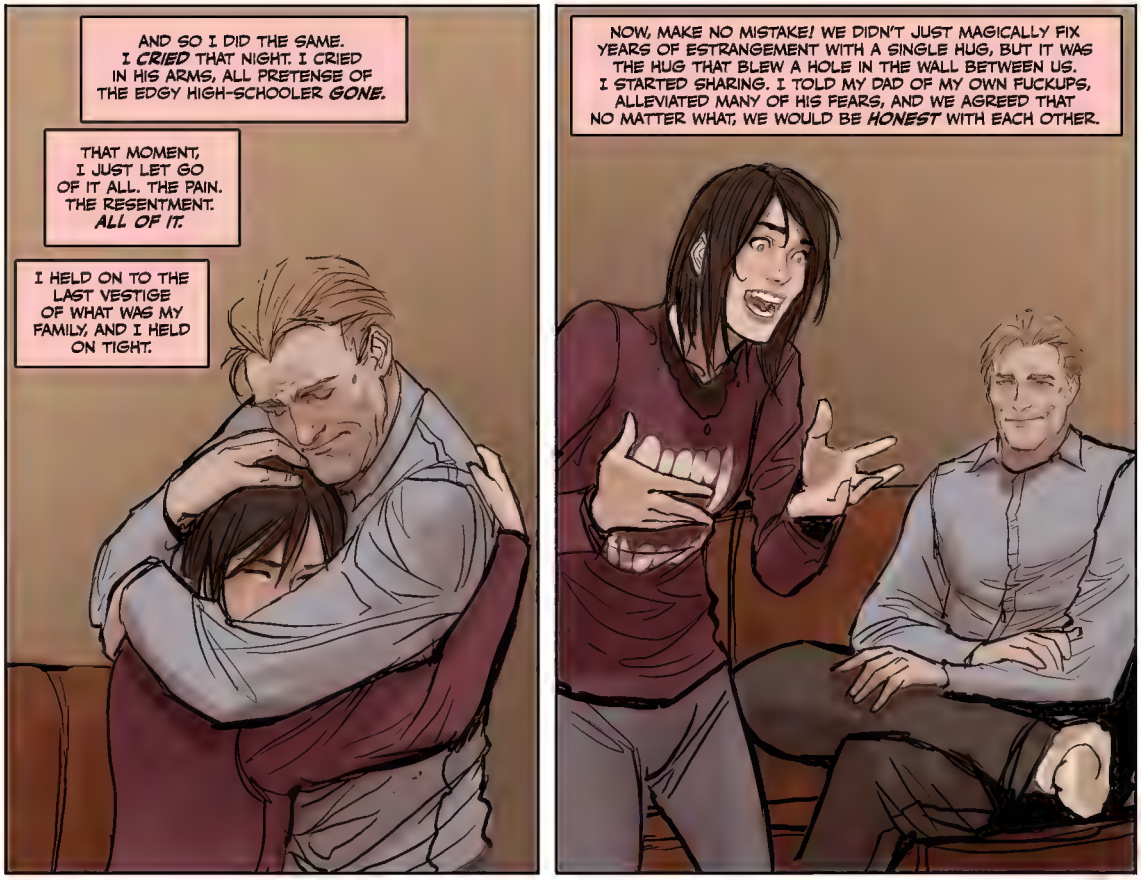
SO... IS THIS FOR SOME SORT OF *PARTY?*

CONCERT.
AND MAYBE A DATE...

DATE PART'S A BIG MAYBE, THOUGH.

YOU GOT YOUR PEPPER SPRAY WITH YOU?
DAD...

ANNE, IT'S JUST A PRECAUTION.
I MEAN, HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE GUY?


ACTUALLY...

OKAY, BEFORE I SAY ANYTHING ELSE, I NEED YOU TO UNDERSTAND SOMEHTING ABOUT ME AND MY DAD...
SEE, WE LOST MY MOM WHEN I WAS *FOURTEEN.*
FROM THERE ON IT WAS JUST THE TWO OF US. A FATHER AND DAUGHTER PATCHING UP THEIR SHATTERED WORLD. NEVER QUITE KNOWING HOW TO APPROACH EACH OTHER.

I WAS AN ANGRY KID FEELING CHEATED BY LIFE FOR STEALING MY MOM.
HE WAS A COP, UNPREPARED FOR THE ROLE OF A SINGLE PARENT.
NEITHER OF US WAS HANDLING IT WELL.
SOMETIMES, IT SEEMED LIKE ALL WE EVER DID WAS ARGUE.
I GUESS WE HAD TO HIT ROCK BOTTOM BEFORE WE STARTED CLIMBING UP. AND I REMEMBER THE DAY THAT HAPPENED.
SOME KIDS AND I BROKE INTO AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE TO PAINT SOME GRAFFITI...I GOT CAUGHT.
DAUGHTER OF A COP ESCORTED HOME BY THE POLICE...
WE MUST HAVE YELLED AT EACH OTHER FOR OVER AN HOUR THAT NIGHT.
AFTERWARD, MY DAD LEFT THE APARTMENT AND WAS GONE FOR HOURS...
SLAM
AFTER A WHILE, I STARTED TO WORRY. ANGRY OR NOT, STORMING OFF WAS NOT HIS WAY OF DOING THINGS.
AS IT TURNS OUT, HE WENT TO MY MOM'S GRAVE AND SPENT THE TIME THERE JUST...TALKING TO HER.
WHEN HE CAME BACK, HE SAT DOWN WITH ME. HE HAD THIS STRANGE LOOK ABOUT HIM. STARTED SAYING THE WEIRDEST STUFF. TALKING ABOUT ALL THE MISTAKES HE'D MADE IN HIS LIFE. HIS FUCKUPS, ALL THE EMBARRASSING THINGS. THEN HE SAID:
WHEN WE KNEW IT WAS TERMINAL...YOUR MOM SAID: "BILL, IT'S ALL YOU NOW. I NEED YOU TO PROMISE ME. DON'T BE A COP TO HER. BE A FATHER." I GUESS SHE KNEW ME WELL.
WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS...UHH... I HAVE TWO BIG FEARS IN LIFE, MARIANNE. ONE, IS THAT SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN TO ME IN THE LINE OF DUTY, AND YOU'D BE LEFT ALL ALONE. THAT'S WHY I ASKED TO BE TRANSFERRED TO THE EVIDENCE STORAGE. IT'S NOT GLAMOROUS, BUT IT KEEPS ME SAFE.
THE OTHER FEAR IS THAT I MIGHT FAIL YOU AS A FATHER. BETRAY YOUR MOTHER'S TRUST. AND...I DON'T KNOW...MAYBE I HAVE BEEN TOO MUCH OF A COP WHEN YOU JUST NEEDED...
AS HE WENT ON, I REMEMBER THINKING THAT SOMETHING FELT OFF. AND THEN IT HIT ME. HIS EYES WERE RED. I DON'T THINK I EVER SAW MY DAD CRY BEFORE OR AFTER. BUT I KNEW THIS MUCH... THAT NIGHT HE CRIED.



SO WE DID JUST THAT, AND BELIEVE YOU ME, IT WASN'T ALWAYS EASY.

BUT WE KEPT AT IT...

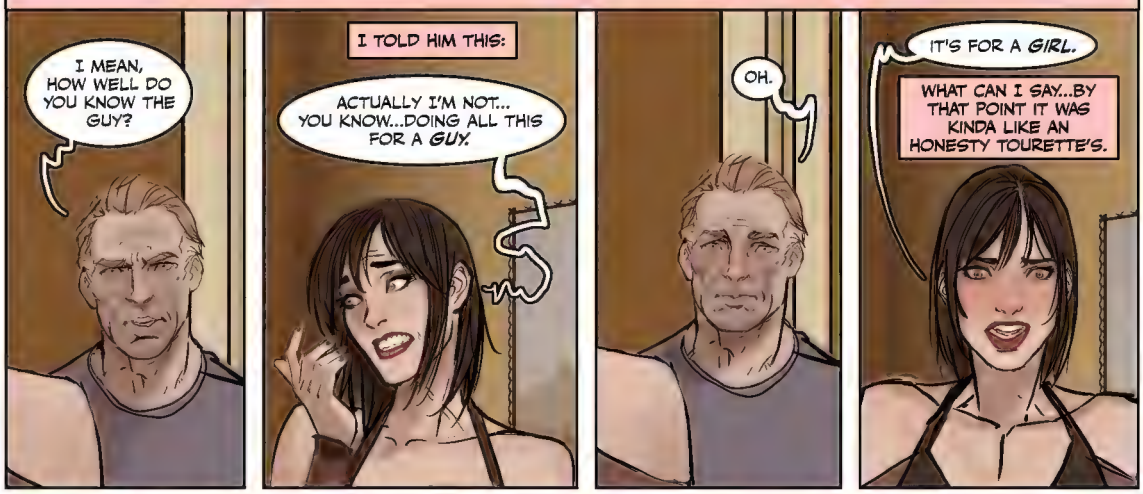
WE CHANGED. I CHANGED. AT SIXTEEN, I STILL WORE MY EDGY EXTERIOR, BUT ON THE INSIDE I WAS THAT CURIOUS KID JUMPING FROM HOBBY TO HOBBY.

AT SEVENTEEN, I MET *CASSIE.*

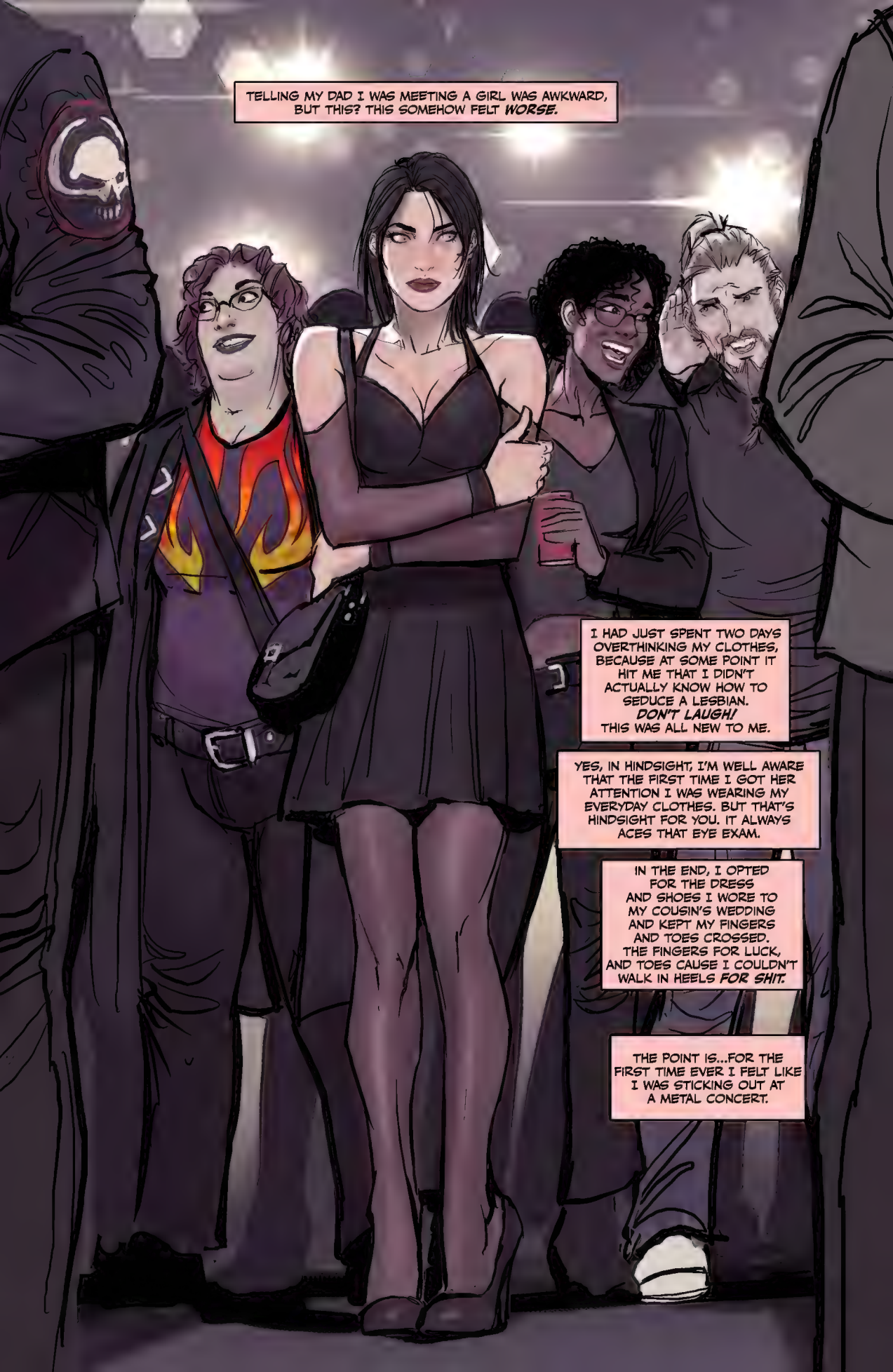
LIFE WAS *GOOD* AGAIN. AND WE OWED IT ALL TO A MOMENT OF HONESTY. WE BUILT ON THAT MOMENT. WE BUILT ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF TRUST IN EACH OTHER.

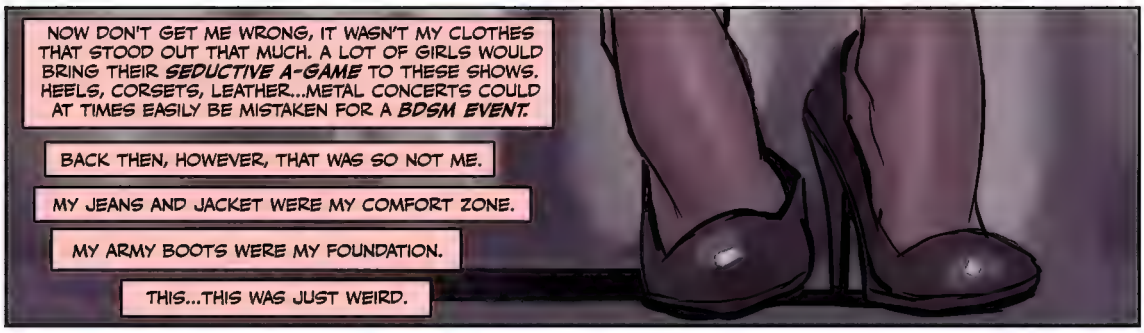
WE WERE A SMALL FAMILY. BUT A *FAMILY* NONETHELESS.

WHY AM I GOING ON ABOUT THIS? WELL, SOME OF MY REASONS WILL MAKE SENSE MUCH LATER, BUT FOR NOW I GUESS IT MIGHT HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHY WHEN WHEN HE SAID THIS....

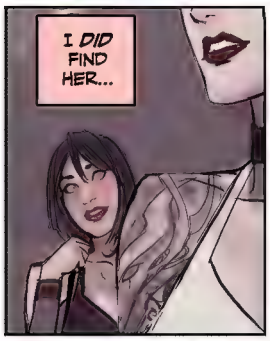


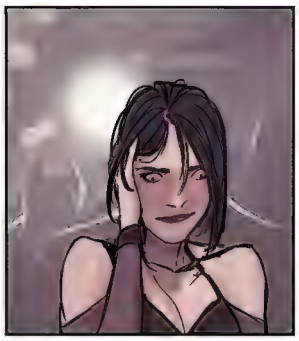
HOWEVER, EVEN WITH ALL THE HONESTY BETWEEN US, THIS WAS STILL SUPER...

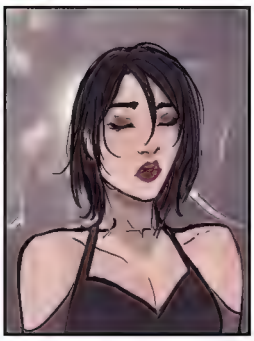

TELLING MY DAD I WAS MEETING A GIRL WAS AWKWARD, BUT THIS? THIS SOMEHOW FELT *WORSE.*
I HAD JUST SPENT TWO DAYS OVERTHINKING MY CLOTHES, BECAUSE AT SOME POINT IT HIT ME THAT I DIDN'T ACTUALLY KNOW HOW TO SEDUCE A LESBIAN. *DON'T LAUGH!* THIS WAS ALL NEW TO ME.
YES, IN HINDSIGHT, I'M WELL AWARE THAT THE FIRST TIME I GOT HER ATTENTION I WAS WEARING MY EVERYDAY CLOTHES. BUT THAT'S HINDSIGHT FOR YOU. IT ALWAYS ACES THAT EYE EXAM.
IN THE END, I OPTED FOR THE DRESS AND SHOES I WORE TO MY COUSIN'S WEDDING AND KEPT MY FINGERS AND TOES CROSSED. THE FINGERS FOR LUCK, AND TOES CAUSE I COULDN'T WALK IN HEELS *FOR SHIT.*
THE POINT IS...FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER I FELT LIKE I WAS STICKING OUT AT A METAL CONCERT.

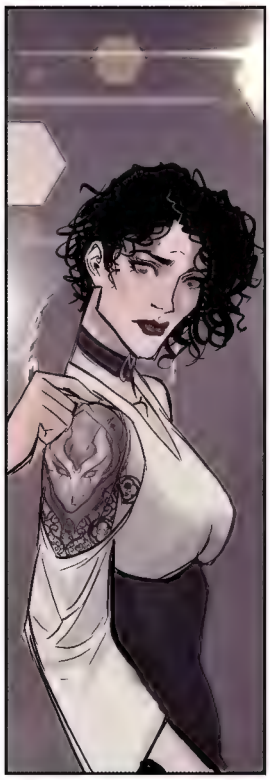

NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG, IT WASN'T MY CLOTHES THAT STOOD OUT THAT MUCH. A LOT OF GIRLS WOULD BRING THEIR *SEDUCTIVE A-GAME* TO THESE SHOWS. HEELS, CORSETS, LEATHER...METAL CONCERTS COULD AT TIMES EASILY BE MISTAKEN FOR A *BDSM EVENT.*
BACK THEN, HOWEVER, THAT WAS SO NOT ME.
MY JEANS AND JACKET WERE MY COMFORT ZONE.
MY ARMY BOOTS WERE MY FOUNDATION.
THIS...THIS WAS JUST WEIRD.

PEOPLE'S LOOKS FELT WEIRD, THE DRESS ALWAYS FELT LIKE IT WAS GETTING SHORTER BY THE MINUTE. THE GROUND FELT WOBBLY, AND IF I WAS TO BE PERFECTLY FRANK, I WAS A LITTLE COLD.
STILL...I HELD ON TO HOPE THAT IF I FOUND HER IT WAS ALL GONNA BE WORTH IT!
AND YOU KNOW WHAT...

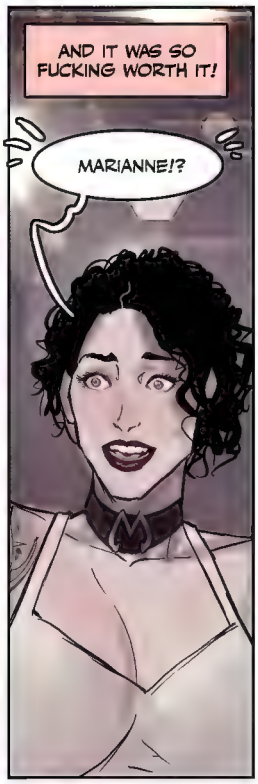

I *DID* FIND HER...







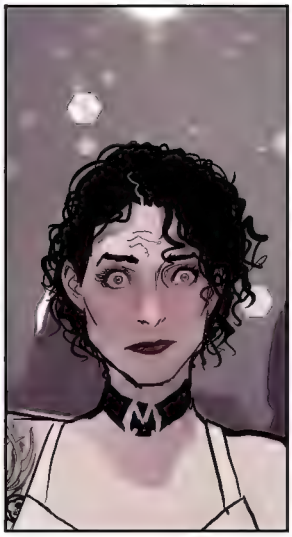
SO, WHAT DOES A GIRL NEED TO DO AROUND HERE TO GET A CUP OF COCOA FROM YOU?

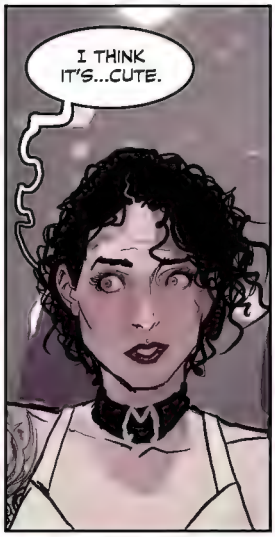

AND IT WAS SO FUCKING WORTH IT!
MARIANNE!?

THAAAT'S A DIFFERENT LOOK!

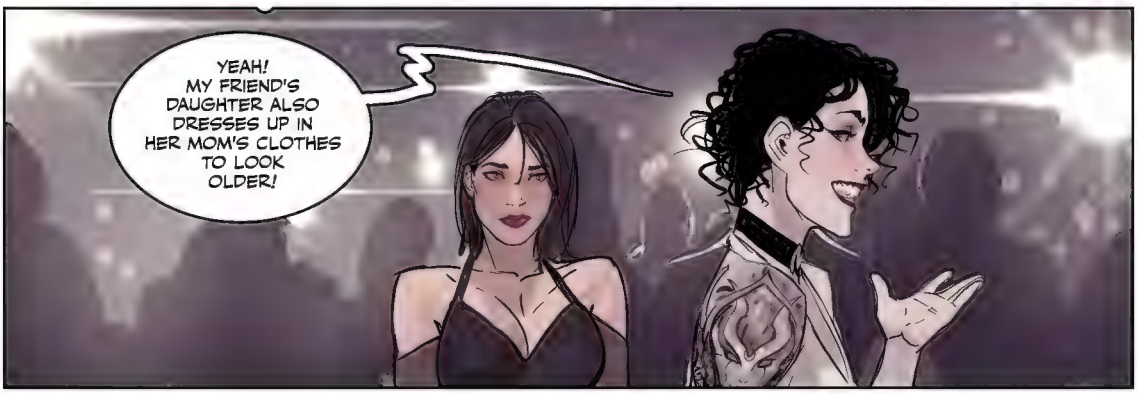
GOOD-DIFFERENT?

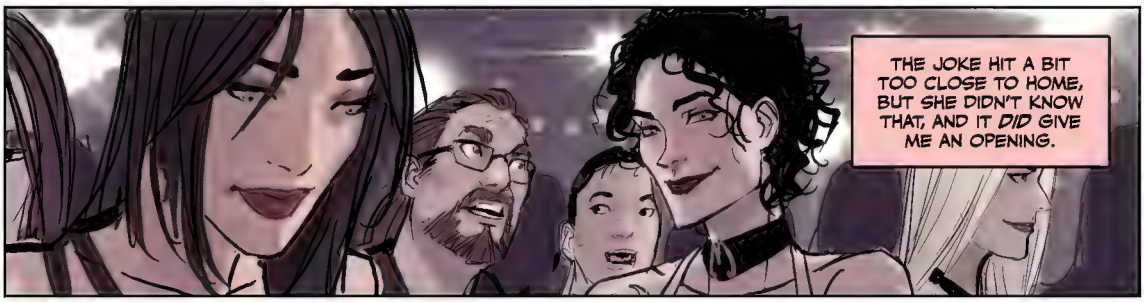
I...UH...

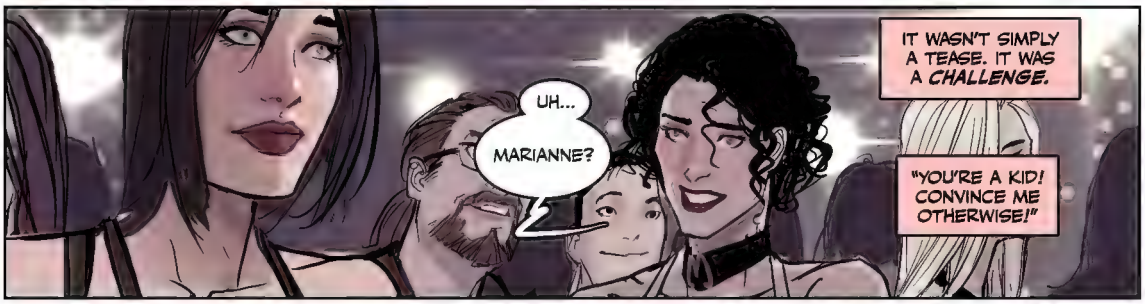


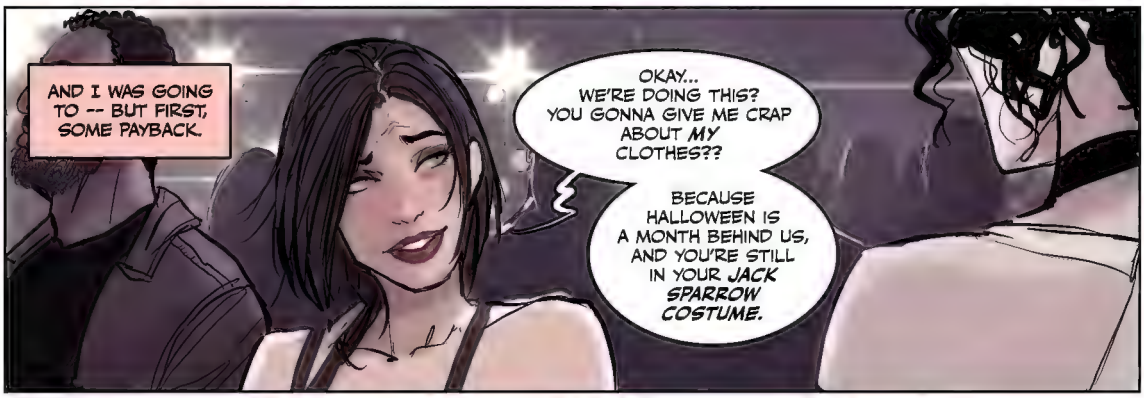

I THINK IT'S...CUTE.

CUTE?


YEAH! MY FRIEND'S DAUGHTER ALSO DRESSES UP IN HER MOM'S CLOTHES TO LOOK OLDER!


THE JOKE HIT A BIT TOO CLOSE TO HOME, BUT SHE DIDN'T KNOW THAT, AND IT *DID* GIVE ME AN OPENING.


IT WASN'T SIMPLY A TEASE. IT WAS A *CHALLENGE.*
UH...
MARIANNE?
"YOU'RE A KID! CONVINCE ME OTHERWISE!"

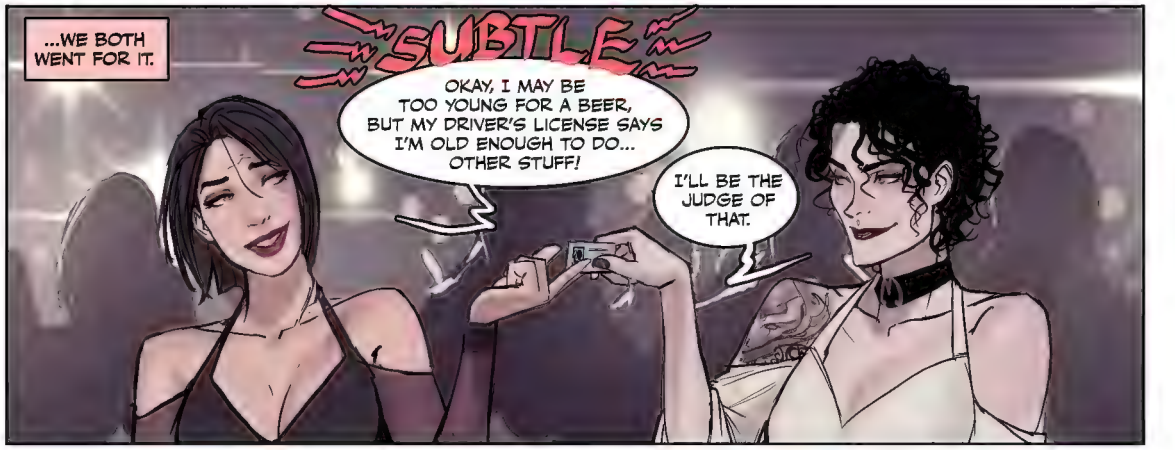

AND I WAS GOING TO -- BUT FIRST, SOME PAYBACK.
OKAY... WE'RE DOING THIS? YOU GONNA GIVE ME CRAP ABOUT *MY* CLOTHES??
BECAUSE HALLOWEEN IS A MONTH BEHIND US, AND YOU'RE STILL IN YOUR *JACK SPARROW COSTUME.*

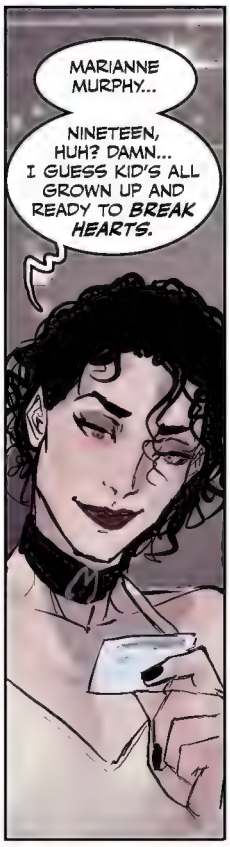
OH, YOU LITTLE BITCH!
HEY, IT'S NOT MY FAULT IF YOU MISSED THE VENUE! I BELIEVE *ALESTORM* IS PLAYING FOUR BLOCKS SOUTH!

I DON'T LISTEN TO PIRATE METAL!
REALLY? CAUSE YOU'RE ONE FRILLY SKIRT AWAY FROM BEING A BARMAID IN A SEEDY PIRATE JOINT!

THE FUNNY THING WAS, WHILE I WAS LOOKING FOR AN EXCUSE TO WHIP OUT MY DRIVER'S LICENSE, LITTLE DID I KNOW SHE WAS WAITING FOR THE VERY SAME OPPORTUNITY.
!

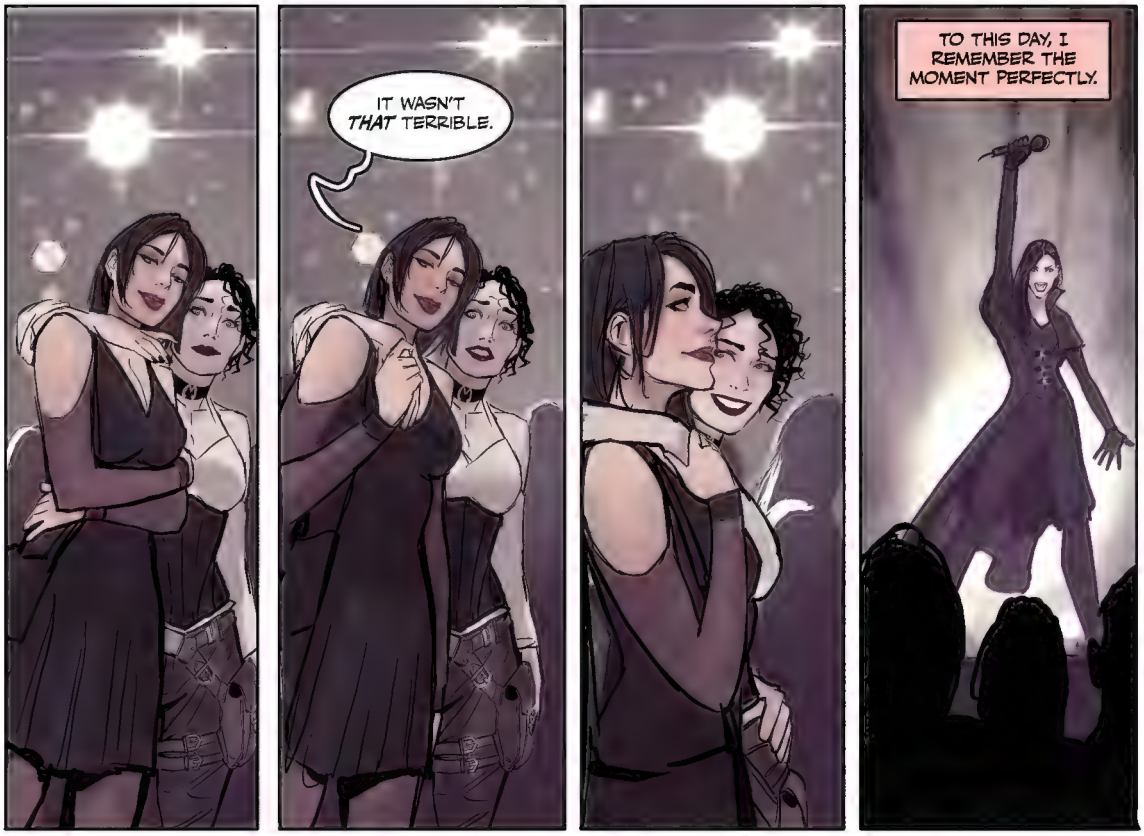
YEAH? WELL, I STILL WOULDN'T SELL BEER TO YOUR UNDERAGED ASS!
NOT WITHOUT SEEING SOME ID FIRST!
AND WHEN SAID OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED ITSELF...


...WE BOTH WENT FOR IT.
SUBTLE
OKAY, I MAY BE TOO YOUNG FOR A BEER, BUT MY DRIVER'S LICENSE SAYS I'M OLD ENOUGH TO DO... OTHER STUFF!
I'LL BE THE JUDGE OF THAT.


MARIANNE MURPHY...
NINETEEN, HUH? DAMN... I GUESS KID'S ALL GROWN UP AND READY TO BREAK HEARTS.

WELL, I DON'T KNOW ABOUT HEARTBREAK, BUT I DO HAVE MY EYE ON A CERTAIN PIRATE BARMAID.

OH, DO YE NOW?
SO, WHAT'LL BE YER POISON, MATEY?
OH, GOD! NEVER DO THAT AGAIN!
YEAH, THAT WAS KINDA TERRIBLE.



LIKE EVERY TIME BEFORE, MIRIAM CLAIMS THE STAGE AS HER OWN, AND WE ALL JOIN IN HER CELEBRATION...

I REMEMBER THE CONSTANT FEAR OF FALLING AS I JUMPED WITH THE CROWD.
I REMEMBER LAURA'S ELATED SMILE.
I REMEMBER MY HEART RACING.
I REMEMBER THE MOMENT MY NAME ECHOED THROUGH THE HALL...
"MARIANNE! OF MY DARK HEART..."
AND...
"I REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN WE HOWLED AT THE NIGHT!"

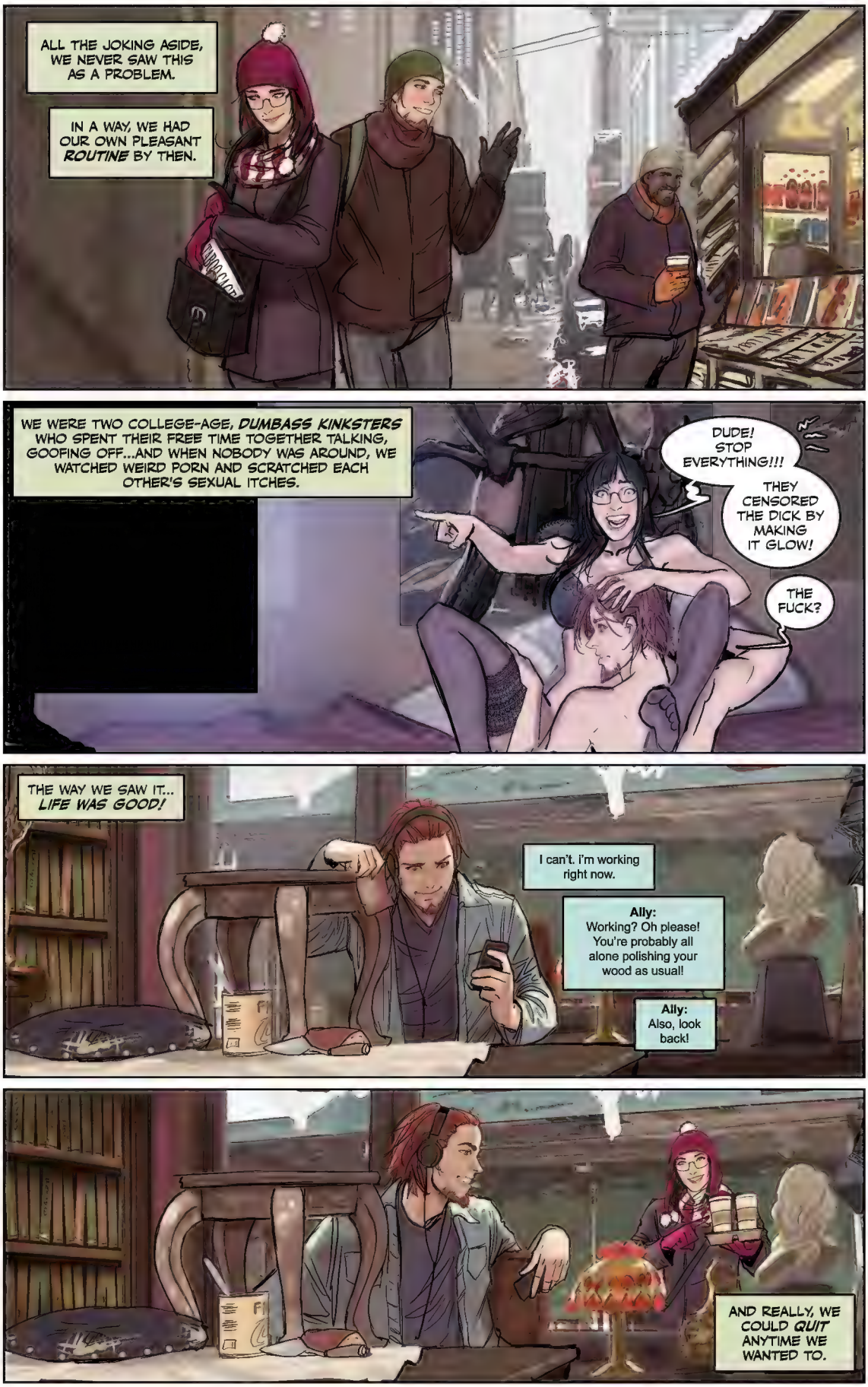
I REMEMBER THE *PERFECT KISS.*

AND FROM THERE ON MY MEMORY IS A BIT BLURRY.
IT WAS A SLOW, TENDER START TO SOMETHING AMAZING.
UHH...YEAH...
MISTRESS...
UM...
PLEASE, MAY I COME?
AH... ALAN...
OKAY...

ASK ME!
MMMH...
ASK ME NOW!
MISTRESS...
I MEAN...COMPARED TO WHAT WAS AHEAD OF US, ALLY AND I WERE OFF TO A SLOW...UM... NOT-SO-TENDER START AS WELL?

MAY I...
MMH... YES?
MAY... OH, GOD...
SAY IT!
MA...
MNHHH, TOO LATE!
OH, COME ON!
YOU SUCK!
HEY, THIS WHOLE ORGASM DENIAL THING DOESN'T WORK IF YOU KEEP HUMPING ME!
BUT... UGH...YEAH... FAIR ENOUGH.
STILL...FOR A MOMENT THERE YOU REALLY GOT INTO IT, HUH?
IT WAS THE MOVIE...
SURE THING... "MISTRESS."

TWO WEEKS HAD PASSSED SINCE OUR FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER...
TWO...INTENSE WEEKS...
HEH...
SPEAKING OF MOVIES, THOUGH... YOU THINK WE GOT A PROBLEM HERE?
HEH...
MAYBE?
WE GONNA DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?
THEY SAY ADMITTING THE PROBLEM IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS ITS SOLUTIONS.
HOWEVER, WHEN WE MADE THAT FIRST STEP --
PFFFT...
WE WERE FACING THE WRONG DIRECTION.
FUCK NO!


ALL THE JOKING ASIDE, WE NEVER SAW THIS AS A PROBLEM.
IN A WAY, WE HAD OUR OWN PLEASANT ROUTINE BY THEN.
WE WERE TWO COLLEGE-AGE, DUMBASS KINKSTERS WHO SPENT THEIR FREE TIME TOGETHER TALKING, GOOFING OFF...AND WHEN NOBODY WAS AROUND, WE WATCHED WEIRD PORN AND SCRATCHED EACH OTHER'S SEXUAL ITCHES.
DUDE! STOP EVERYTHING!!!
THEY CENSORED THE DICK BY MAKING IT GLOW!
THE FUCK?
THE WAY WE SAW IT... LIFE WAS GOOD!
I can't. i'm working right now.
Ally: Working? Oh please! You're probably all alone polishing your wood as usual!
Ally: Also, look back!
AND REALLY, WE COULD QUIT ANYTIME WE WANTED TO.

"DISCOVER YOUR SPACE AND MAKE IT YOUR OWN..."
The power struggle
Dominant or submissive? Owning your space.
valentine's

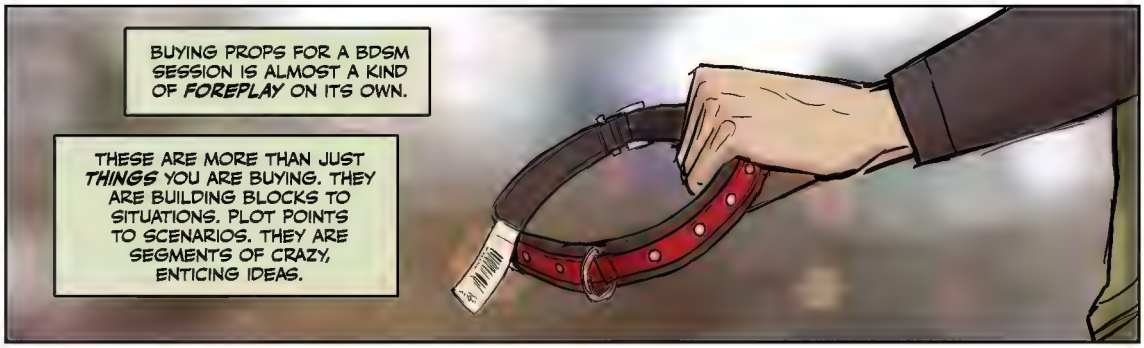
"AM I A DOM, OR AM I A SUB? PERHAPS I AM SOMETHING INBETWEEN?"
"THIS IS A QUESTION BEST ANSWERED BY EXPLORING AND OWNING YOUR MENTAL SPACE."
"WHEN ENGAGING A SCENE, DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE ABOUT YOUR ROLE? DO YOU FEEL ENTHUSIASTIC ENOUGH TO SLIP INTO IT?"
TABOO CAGE

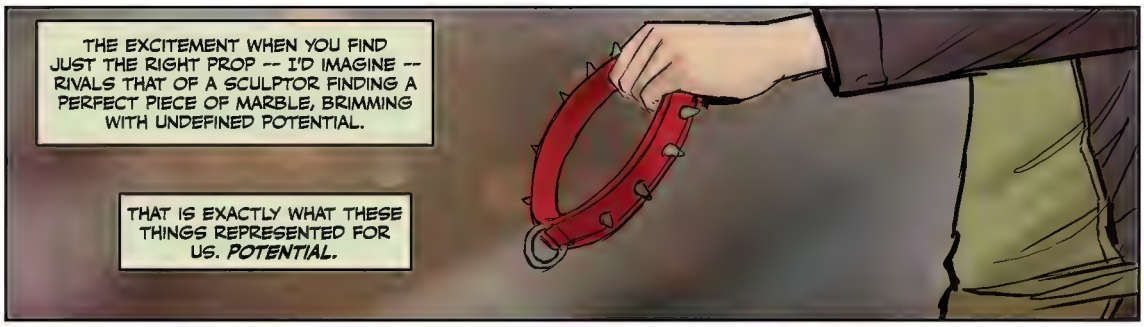
"DO YOU EAGERLY WANT TO BE RESTRAINED? DOES IT HELP YOU SINK DEEPER INTO YOUR ROLE, WHERE YOU TRULY SUBMIT TO YOUR DOMINANT?"
"DO YOU FIND YOURSELF EASILY ASSERTING YOUR WILL OVER YOUR SUBMISSIVE PARTNER? DOES SLIPPING INTO THAT STATE OF MIND COME QUICKLY AND WITH LITTLE EFFORT?"
"DO YOU FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE IN YOUR DOMSPACE, OR YOUR SUBSPACE?"
"THIS TEST IS HERE TO HELP YOU ANSWER THOSE QUESTIONS."
CAGE
dominant or submissive? Owning your space.
valentine's day price guide
WELL, SHIT -- IT'S A TEST IN A PORN MAGAZINE. SEEMS LIKE LEGIT SCIENCE TO ME.
HEH...
...

UM, SO...YOU FREE THIS FRIDAY NIGHT?
NO...I TOOK ON A LITTLE EXTRA WORK AT THE ANTIQUE SHOP.
OH...
I HAVE THURSDAY OFF? THAT WORK FOR YOU?
ALLY?
YOU WANNA... LIKE...*TRY IT?*
TAROT CAGE
THE TEST?

YEAH, I MEAN... NO! NOT THE MAGAZINE ONE...YOU WANNA LIKE TRY IT FOR REAL.
OH... LIKE...YOU AND ME... BDSM?
UH... YEAH?
I MEAN, I DON'T WANNA PUSH...
N-NO, IT'S NOT THAT! IT'S JUST LIKE...WOW...NOT REALLY SOMETHING I EVER EXPECTED ANYONE TO LIKE...PUT ON THE TABLE, YOU KNOW? UH...
OKAY...UH SO...THAT A YES OR NO?
CAUSE I'M KINDA FREAKING OUT INTERNALLY RIGHT NOW.
NO NEED. I'M IN!
YOU MEAN IT?
YEAH! LET'S DO IT!

LIKE I SAID, WE COULD QUIT ANY TIME WE WANTED TO.
IT'S JUST...
WE REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO.
HEH...WELL, I GUESS WE'VE GOT SOME SHOPPING TO DO!
I GUESS WE DO!


BUYING PROPS FOR A BDSM SESSION IS ALMOST A KIND OF *FOREPLAY* ON ITS OWN.
THESE ARE MORE THAN JUST *THINGS* YOU ARE BUYING. THEY ARE BUILDING BLOCKS TO SITUATIONS. PLOT POINTS TO SCENARIOS. THEY ARE SEGMENTS OF CRAZY, ENTICING IDEAS.


THE EXCITEMENT WHEN YOU FIND JUST THE RIGHT PROP -- I'D IMAGINE -- RIVALS THAT OF A SCULPTOR FINDING A PERFECT PIECE OF MARBLE, BRIMMING WITH UNDEFINED POTENTIAL.
THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT THESE THINGS REPRESENTED FOR US. *POTENTIAL.*

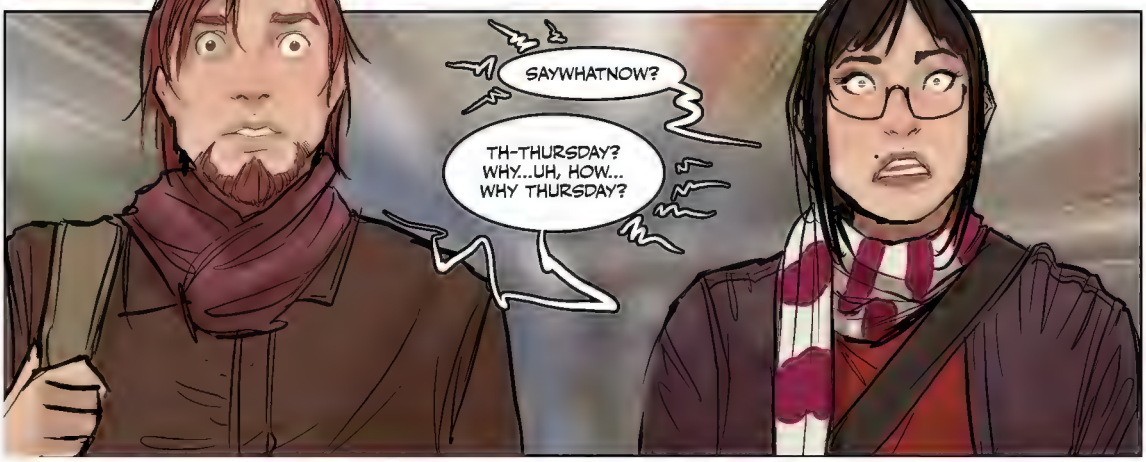
AND LIKE THE AFOREMENTIONED SCULPTOR, WE WERE OUT IN THE WILD, LOOKING FOR JUST THE RIGHT MARBLE.
AND WE HAD A FEW VERY SPECIFIC QUARRIES IN MIND...

OH, AND ALSO THE RUBBER BALLS! OUR PEANUT LOVES THESE!
HAPPY PAW
PET STORE

YUP...WHEN YOU'RE AN ADULT WITH A FETISH AND DISPOSABLE INCOME, YOU MAKE YOUR WAY TO A SEX SHOP, OR NOWADAYS, JUST ORDER STUFF IN...
WE, HOWEVER, WERE COLLEGE STUDENTS ON A TIGHT BUDGET. SO TIGHT THAT ALLY HAD ONE PAIR OF SEXY STOCKINGS WHICH SHE ALWAYS MADE SURE I WAS CAREFUL WITH.
WE *IMPROVISED.* PET STORES, GENERAL STORES HARDWARE STORES, YOU NAME IT. WE WERE THERE LOOKING THROUGH THEIR STOCK WITH A DIFFERENT MINDSET.
TO THIS DAY, I REMEMBER THOSE "SCAVENGER HUNTS" FONDLY. GRABBING RANDOM THINGS, MUNDANE STUFF TO PEOPLE AROUND US...
?
AND SEEING THEM IN A DIFFERENT, *EXCITING* WAY.
AND THE FUN OF IT WAS, NOBODY HAD ANY IDEA.
NOBODY SUSPECTED A THING.

OUR THURSDAY EVENING PLANS WERE LOOKING GOOD.
FOUR ACRYLIC SPRAYS...THAT ALL?
YUP!
WE HAVE MASKING TAPE ON SALE!
NO, I'M STILL GOOD ON THAT.
ALRIGHT. TWENTY-TWO BUCKS IT IS.
OH, AND BILL! NOW DON'T GO VANDALIZING PUBLIC PROPERTY WITH THOSE, OKAY?
HILARIOUS, FRANK!
HEH!
HEY THERE!
HI! SO, WE'LL TAKE THESE AND WE'LL NEED A BAG AS WELL.
SURE THING. OKAY, SO, SYNTHETIC ROPE, 40 FT.
HEMP ROPE... 15 FT.
...DUCT TAPE.

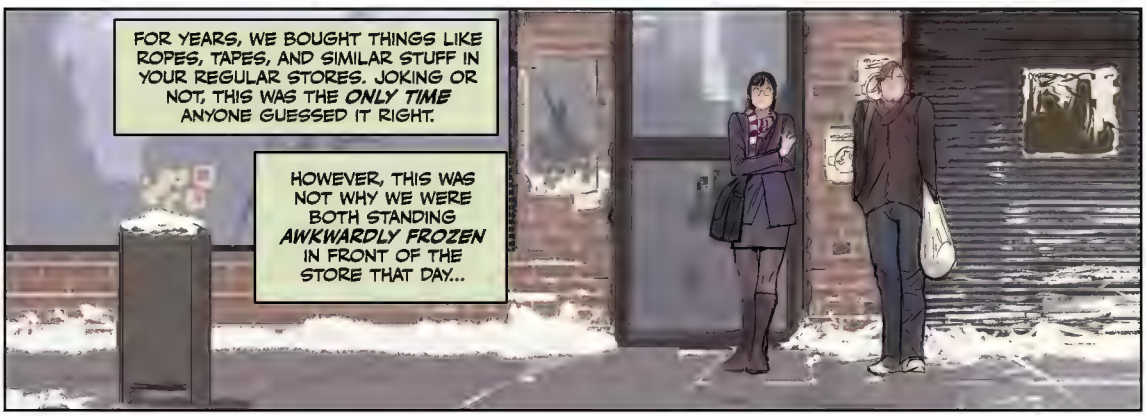
JUST THE ROPES AND DUCT TAPE?
YUP!
YOU GOT IT! HEH! SO...YOU TWO PLANNING A KIDNAPPING OR A REALLY *WILD* THURSDAY NIGHT?

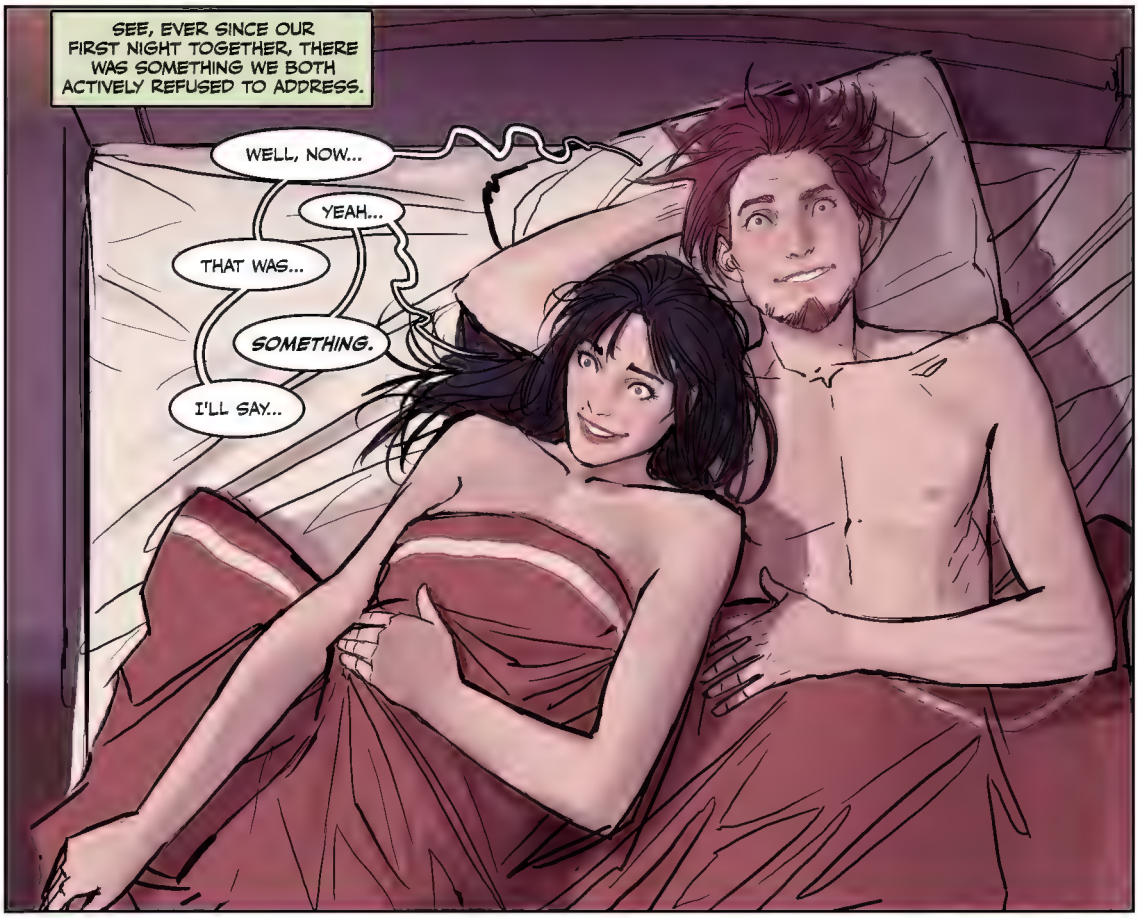

SAYWHATNOW?
TH-THURSDAY? WHY...UH, HOW... WHY THURSDAY?

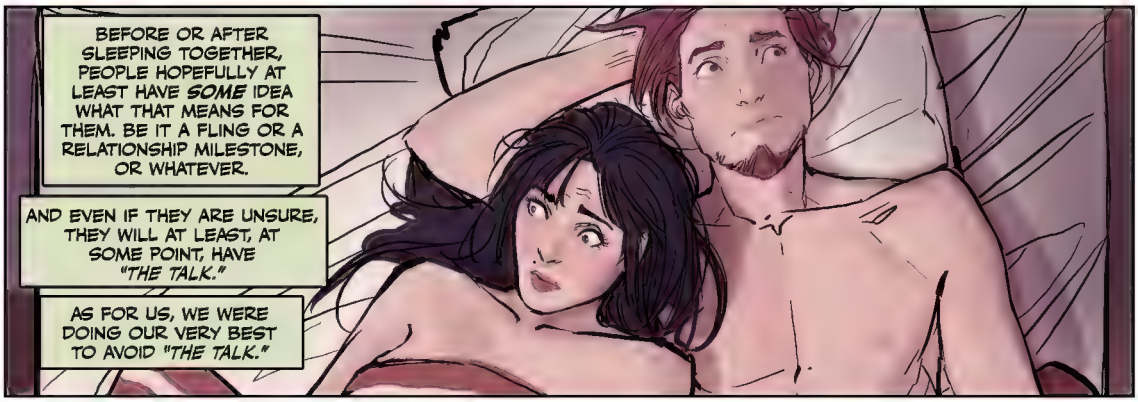
THURSDAY IS *VALENTINE'S DAY?*
ROPES? DUCT TAPE? BIT OF WILD FUN? NOTHING?
UH, LISTEN...
DON'T MIND ME.
IT'S A BORING JOB AND I MAKE BAD JOKES.

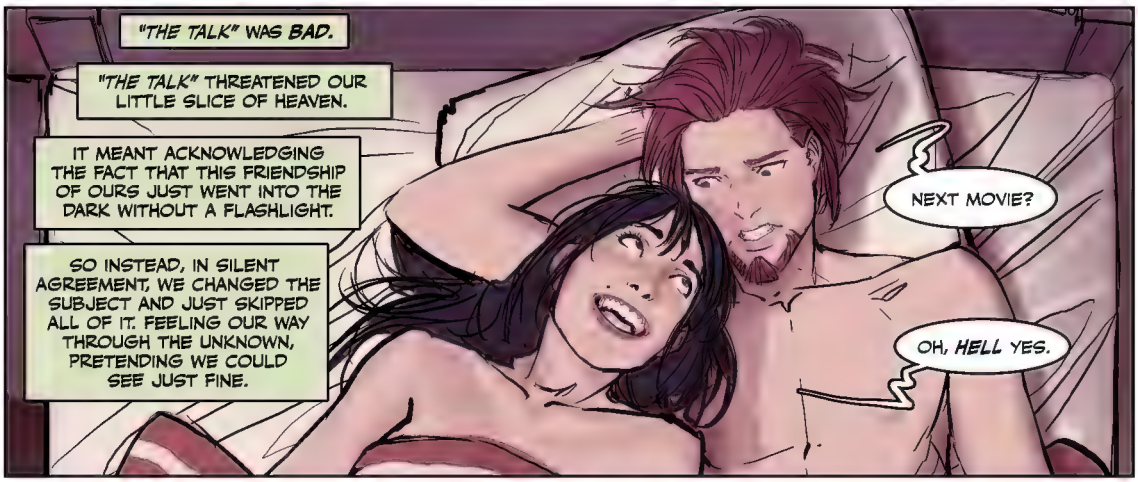
OH... RIGHT...NO, IT'S FINE! VALENTINE'S DAY...
THAT'S *THIS* THURSDAY...
TOTALLY!

RIGHT...
YEAH, ANYHOW, THAT'LL BE TWENTY-FOUR BUCKS.


FOR YEARS, WE BOUGHT THINGS LIKE ROPES, TAPES, AND SIMILAR STUFF IN YOUR REGULAR STORES. JOKING OR NOT, THIS WAS THE *ONLY TIME* ANYONE GUESSED IT RIGHT.
HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT WHY WE WERE BOTH STANDING *AWKWARDLY FROZEN* IN FRONT OF THE STORE THAT DAY...

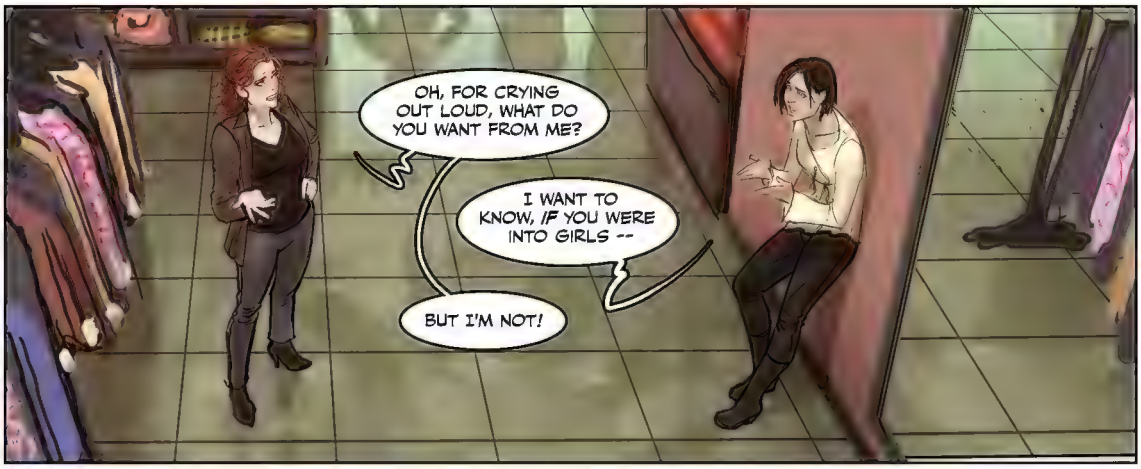

SEE, EVER SINCE OUR FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER, THERE WAS SOMETHING WE BOTH ACTIVELY REFUSED TO ADDRESS.
WELL, NOW...
YEAH...
THAT WAS...
SOMETHING.
I'LL SAY...


BEFORE OR AFTER SLEEPING TOGETHER, PEOPLE HOPEFULLY AT LEAST HAVE SOME IDEA WHAT THAT MEANS FOR THEM. BE IT A FLING OR A RELATIONSHIP MILESTONE, OR WHATEVER.
AND EVEN IF THEY ARE UNSURE, THEY WILL AT LEAST, AT SOME POINT, HAVE "THE TALK."
AS FOR US, WE WERE DOING OUR VERY BEST TO AVOID "THE TALK."

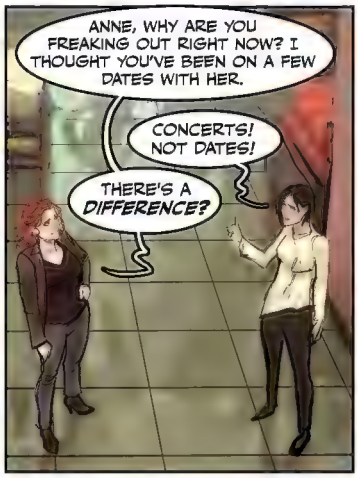

"THE TALK" WAS BAD.
"THE TALK" THREATENED OUR LITTLE SLICE OF HEAVEN.
IT MEANT ACKNOWLEDGING THE FACT THAT THIS FRIENDSHIP OF OURS JUST WENT INTO THE DARK WITHOUT A FLASHLIGHT.
SO INSTEAD, IN SILENT AGREEMENT, WE CHANGED THE SUBJECT AND JUST SKIPPED ALL OF IT. FEELING OUR WAY THROUGH THE UNKNOWN, PRETENDING WE COULD SEE JUST FINE.
NEXT MOVIE?
OH, HELL YES.

AND THIS NOT HAVING "THE TALK" THING WAS WORKING FINE. JUST. FINE.
...UNTIL WE BOTH REALIZED WE PICKED VALENTINE'S DAY FOR OUR FIRST BDSM SESSION.
BUT YOU KNOW WHAT?
SOOO... THURSDAY.
YEAH... I MEAN, IF YOU'RE COOL WITH IT.
I'M COOL IF YOU'RE COOL!
OH... UH, YEAH! COOL!
KEEEEWL...
WE WERE COOL WITH IT!

IT'S COOL!
COOL?
YOU KNOW... IT'S NICE!
I'M NOT REALLY LOOKING FOR JUST "NICE" HERE!
I MEAN, IT LOOKS GOOD ON YOU.
UGH...YOU'RE NO HELP.

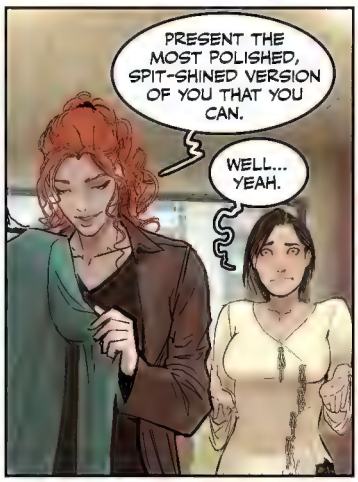

OH, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?
I WANT TO KNOW, *IF* YOU WERE INTO GIRLS --
BUT I'M NOT!

GROAN!


ANNE, WHY ARE YOU FREAKING OUT RIGHT NOW? I THOUGHT YOU'VE BEEN ON A FEW DATES WITH HER.
CONCERTS! NOT DATES!
THERE'S A *DIFFERENCE?*

UH...WELL...IT'S A MATTER OF CONVERSATION TOPICS...I DON'T KNOW, WHEN SURROUNDED BY METAL WE MOSTLY TALK ABOUT BANDS AND THEN, I DON'T KNOW, MAKE OUT A BIT...
THIS IS AN *ACTUAL DATE!* WE'RE GOING OUT FOR DINNER, AND LIKE, ADULT STUFF.

WOW...YOU *DO* SOUND LIKE A KID! SHE MIGHT NEED TO DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR ID.
YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, DAMN IT! WE'LL GET TO REALLY KNOW EACH OTHER AND I JUST WANT TO...


PRESENT THE MOST POLISHED, SPIT-SHINED VERSION OF YOU THAT YOU CAN.
WELL... YEAH.

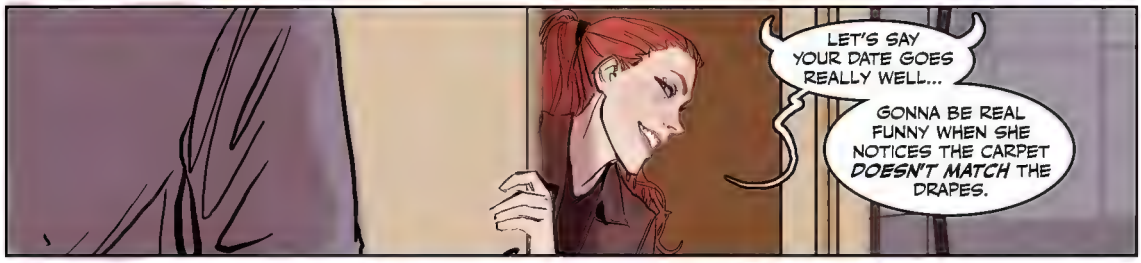
SHE SAID YES TO GRUNGY-CLOTHES ANNE AND TO FANCY-CLOTHES ANNE.
THE COMMON DENOMINATOR HERE IS *YOU.* OKAY?
THIS WILL DO!

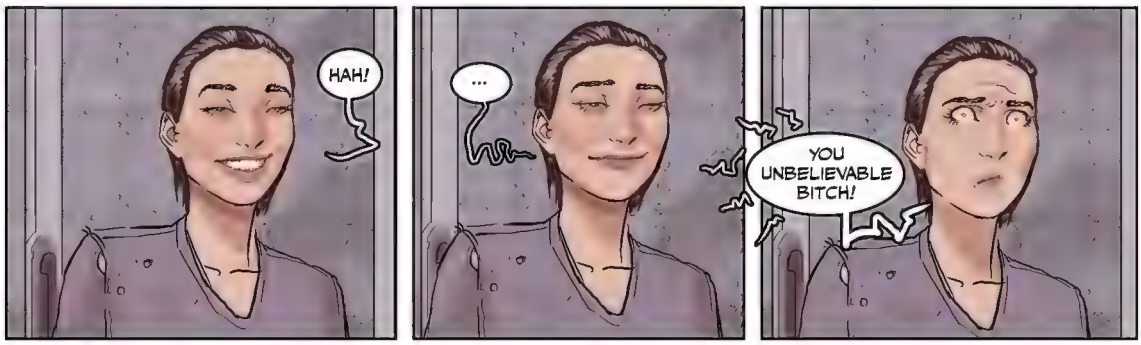
YOU THINK?

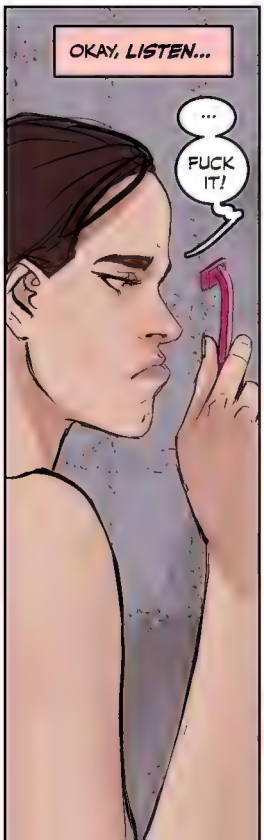
HM...

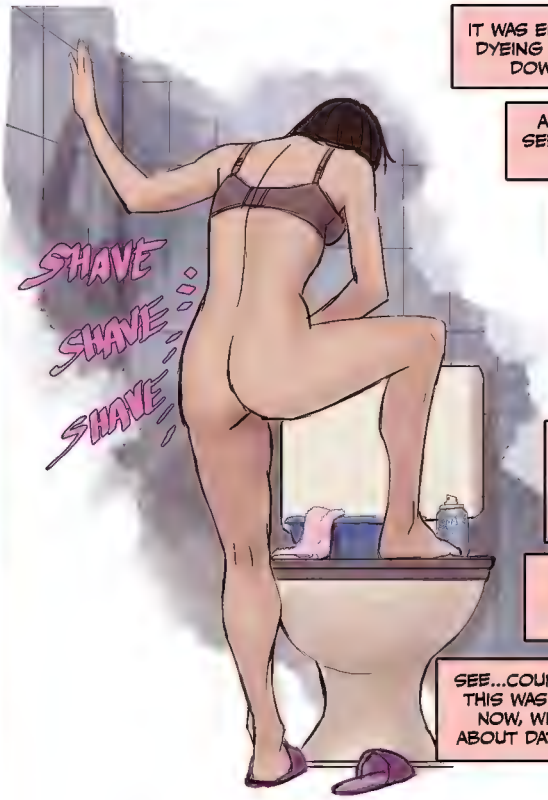
CASSIE, YOU GOT SOME FREE TIME?
I GOT A FEW HOURS. WHY?

"I NEED A FAVOR..."
YOU KNOW, THEY HAVE PROFESSIONALS THAT DO THIS STUFF.
WHICH, AT THE MOMENT, I CAN'T AFFORD, CAUSE I BURNED THROUGH MY FUN-FUNDS TO BUY THE CLOTHES AND GO TO CONCERTS. SO MY OPTIONS WERE TO EITHER GO WITH AN OUTGROWTH...
...OR HAVE MY BEST FRIEND EVER SAVE MY ASS.
I'M OFF TO WORK YOU TWO! THERE'S CHICKEN AND GREEK SALAD IN THE FRIDGE IF YOU'RE HUNGRY. OKAY?
THANKS, DAD! SEE YA!
I'LL BE OFF AS WELL. TOM IS COMING OVER IN AN HOUR.
PLUS, YOU'RE ALL DARK AND EDGY AGAIN SO MY WORK HERE IS DONE.
ALMOST DARK AND EDGY ENOUGH, BUT THIS PART I CAN DO ON MY OWN.
UH... OKAY, I'M JUST GONNA PUT THIS OUT THERE -- DYING YOUR EYEBROWS IS WEIRD.
CASSIE, I DON'T NEED THIS SHIT RIGHT NOW.
FINE, FINE! YOU KEEP ON BEING A SELF-LOATHING BLONDE, I'M OUT!
GOOD LUCK ON YOUR DATE!
THANKS.









IT WAS EITHER THIS OR DYEING *EVERYTHING* DOWN THERE.

AND YES, I KNOW IT SEEMS LIKE A MASSIVE OVERREACTION.

IN HINDSIGHT, IT PROBABLY WAS...

BUT, LIKE I SAID... THIS WAS *THE BIG NIGHT.*

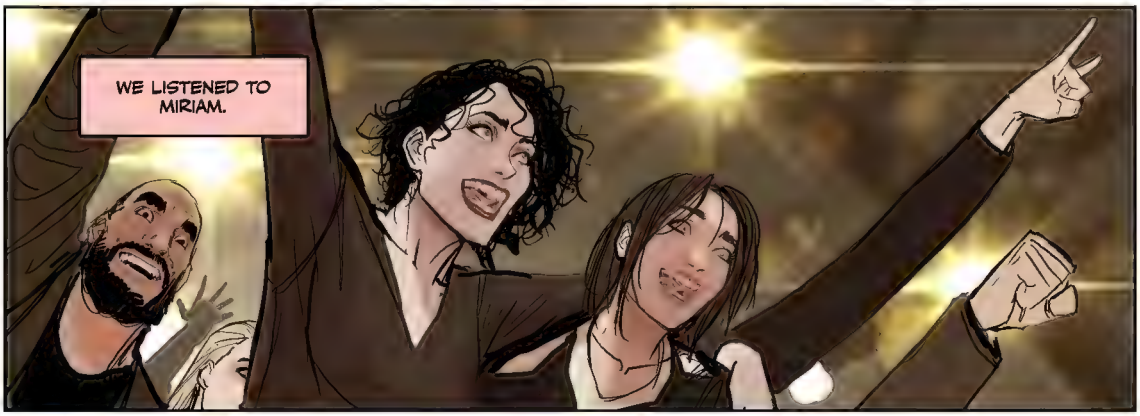
THE BIG DATE...

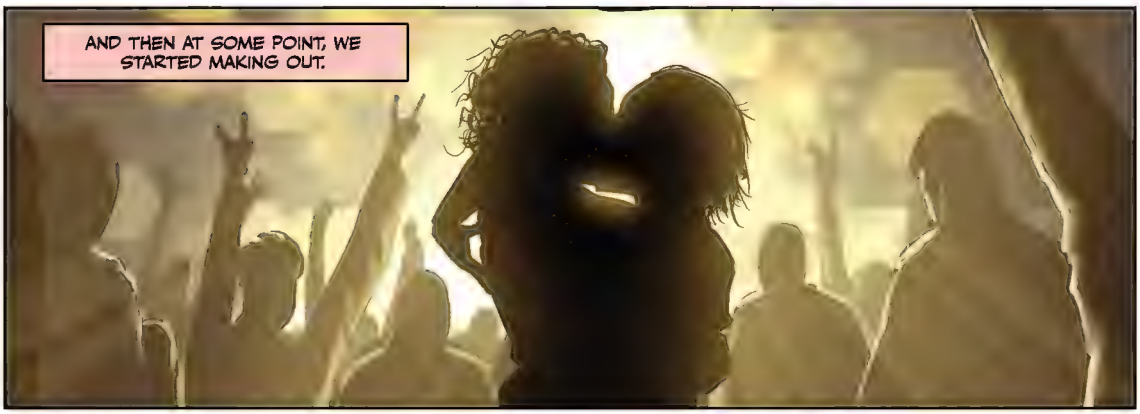
AND YOU KNOW WHAT? FUCK YEAH, I WAS GONNA DO *EVERYTHING* IN MY POWER TO MAKE IT A PERFECT ONE!

BUT I GUESS I SHOULD EXPLAIN WHY THIS NIGHT WAS SO IMPORTANT...

SEE...COUNTING FROM OUR FIRST KISS, THIS WAS GONNA BE OUR FIFTH DATE. NOW, WHY DID I SKIP TELLING YOU ABOUT DATES TWO, THREE, AND FOUR?

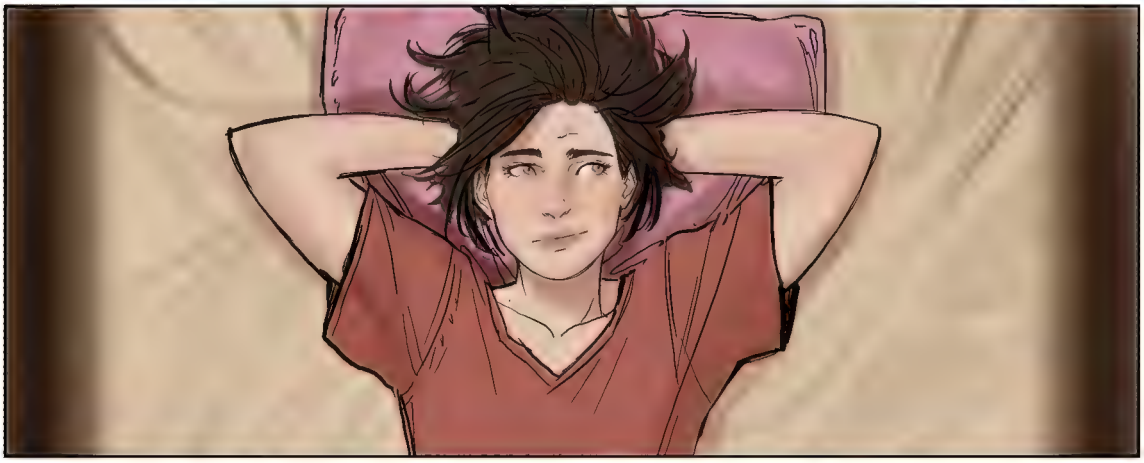
WELL, HERE IS MY SECOND DATE WITH HER IN A NUTSHELL:
WE MET, WE FLIRTED, SHE TEASED ME ABOUT THE LEGAL DRINKING AGE...


WE LISTENED TO MIRIAM.


AND THEN AT SOME POINT, WE STARTED MAKING OUT.

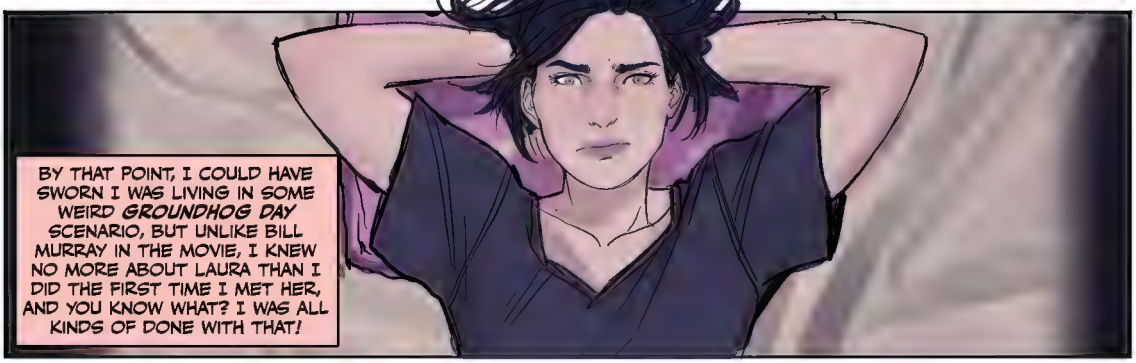
AFTERWARD, I WOULD COME HOME AND BASK IN THE MEMORIES.
SOUND FAMILIAR?
IT SHOULD. TAKE AWAY THE HEELS AND FANCY DRESS, AND IT WAS A BEAT-BY-BEAT REHASH OF OUR *FIRST DATE.*

IN FACT...HERE IS OUR *THIRD* DATE...



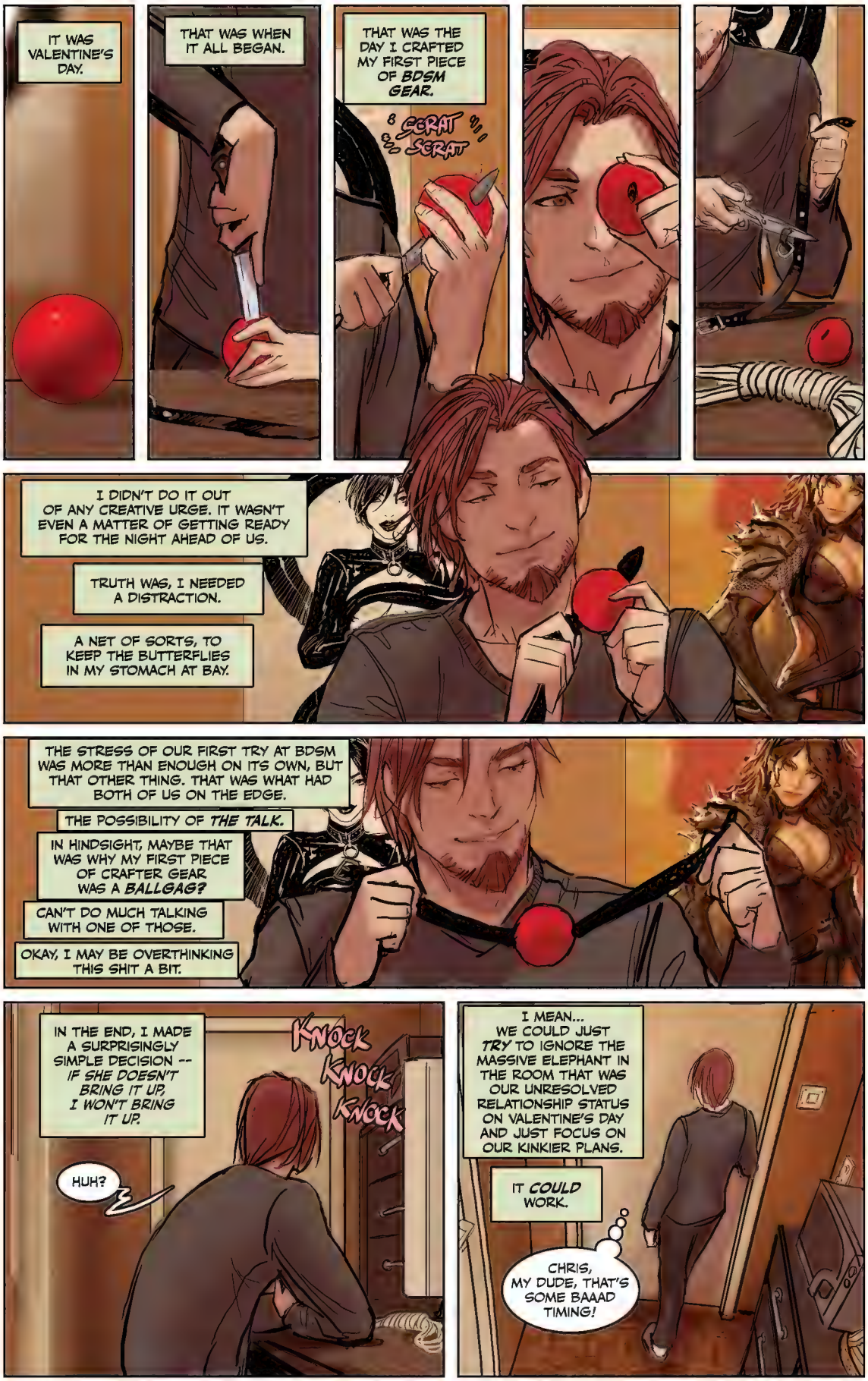
AND THE *FOURTH*...

I WASN'T KIDDING WHEN I SAID WE WERE TAKING IT SLOW. IN FACT, "RUNNING IN PLACE" WOULD HAVE BEEN A BETTER DESCRIPTION.


BY THAT POINT, I COULD HAVE SWORN I WAS LIVING IN SOME WEIRD *GROUNDHOG DAY* SCENARIO, BUT UNLIKE BILL MURRAY IN THE MOVIE, I KNEW NO MORE ABOUT LAURA THAN I DID THE FIRST TIME I MET HER, AND YOU KNOW WHAT? I WAS ALL KINDS OF DONE WITH THAT!

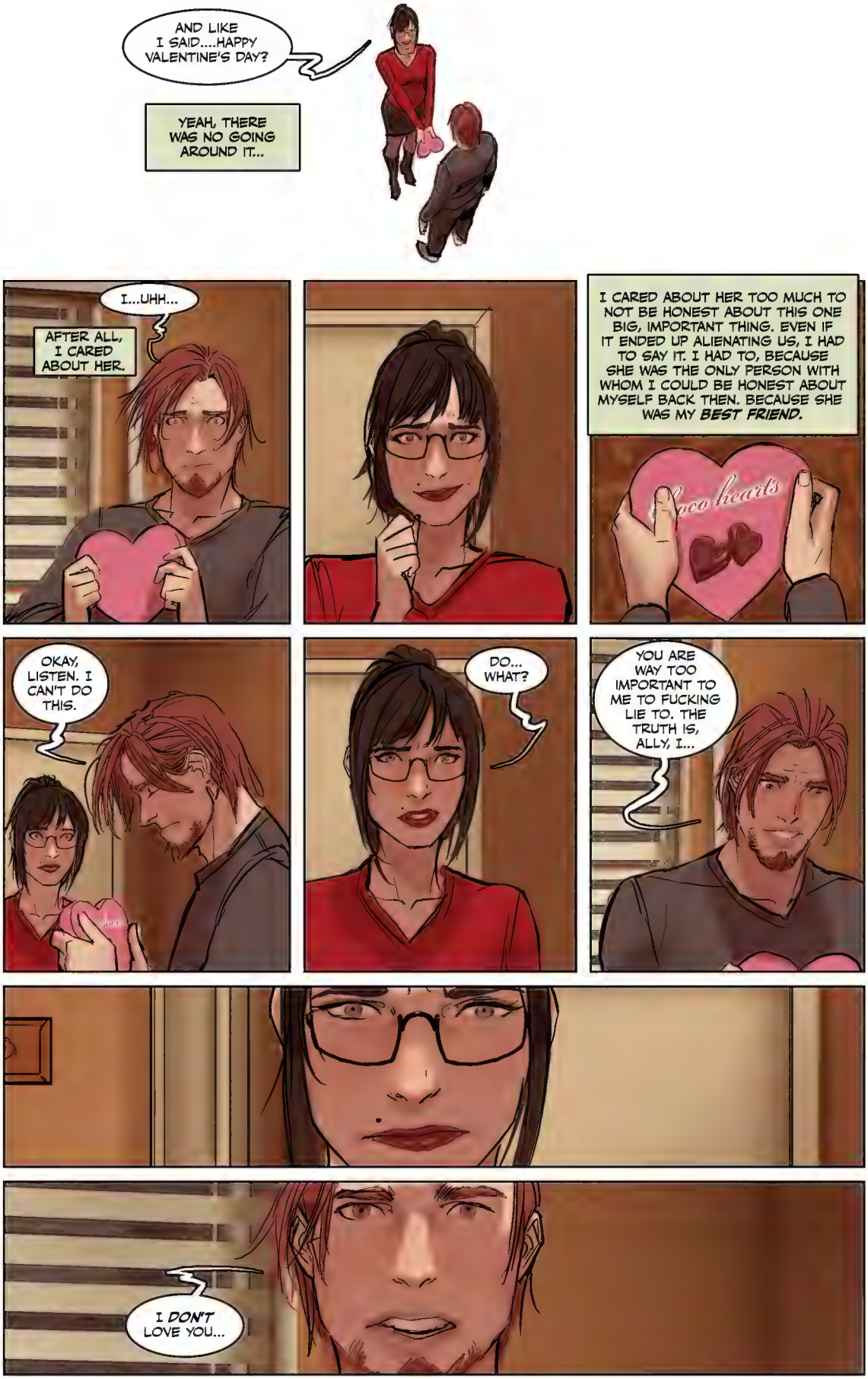
WHAT THE...
UH... HEY, LAURA, IT'S ME.
ANNE? UHHHH... IT'S 3 AM.
I KNOW, AND I'M SORRY... IT'S JUST...I HAVE TO ASK!
ASK WHAT?
YOU WANNA GO OUT WITH ME THIS FRIDAY? LIKE ON A REAL DATE?
OH...
YOU THERE?
Y-YEAH... SORRY...UH... SURE, LET'S DO THAT. CALL ME TOMORROW, OKAY?
YEAH! WILL DO!
THREE TIMES, I MADE MY MOVE ON LAURA.
I ASKED HER FOR DRINKS AT OUR FIRST CONCERT.
I SEDUCED HER AT OUR SECOND ONE.
AND THAT NIGHT AT THREE A.M., I MADE MY THIRD MOVE.
AND AS IT TURNED OUT, THIS WAS GOING TO BE THE BIG ONE.

IT WAS A COLD FRIDAY NIGHT IN JANUARY. BUT I WAS OBLIVIOUS TO EVERYTHING.
I GUESS IT'S HARD TO THINK OF THE COLD, WHEN YOU ARE EQUAL PARTS ECSTATIC AND FEARFUL.
ECSTATIC FOR THE DATE... BUT FEARFUL OF SCREWING IT UP.
I MEAN, I WAS THE ONE WHO INITIATED ALL OF THIS.
AS AN ARTIST, I WAS WELL FAMILIARIZED WITH THE NAGGING WORM OF SELF-DOUBT, SO I RECOGNIZED ITS WHISPERS IN THE BACK OF MY MIND.
"WHAT IF I SCREW IT UP?"
"WHAT IF I BORE HER?"
"WHAT IF WE GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND DON'T LIKE WHAT WE SEE ANYMORE?"
WHAT IF...
WHAT IF....
WHAT IF...
MARIANNE?
AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, JUST LIKE THAT, ALL OF THE WHAT-IFS WERE GONE.
SHE WAS THERE.
HER SMILE AND VOICE TURNING MY HEART INTO A RACING ANIMAL, RESTLESS AND WILD.
AND I THOUGHT, "ALL OF MY EFFORT WAS WORTH IT. THIS DATE IS GOING TO BE AMAZING."
I WAS HALF RIGHT.
THAT WAS THE NIGHT I FELL IN LOVE WITH LAURA.
THE NIGHT OF OUR BAD DATE.

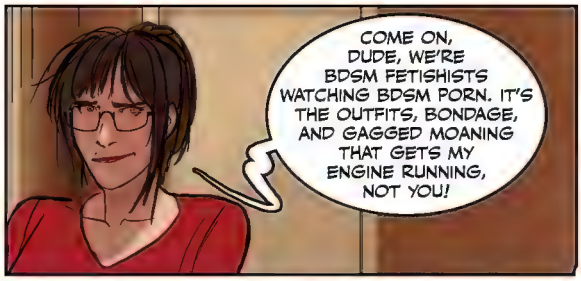

IT WAS VALENTINE'S DAY.
THAT WAS WHEN IT ALL BEGAN.
THAT WAS THE DAY I CRAFTED MY FIRST PIECE OF BDSM GEAR.
SCRAT SCRAT
I DIDN'T DO IT OUT OF ANY CREATIVE URGE. IT WASN'T EVEN A MATTER OF GETTING READY FOR THE NIGHT AHEAD OF US.
TRUTH WAS, I NEEDED A DISTRACTION.
A NET OF SORTS, TO KEEP THE BUTTERFLIES IN MY STOMACH AT BAY.
THE STRESS OF OUR FIRST TRY AT BDSM WAS MORE THAN ENOUGH ON ITS OWN, BUT THAT OTHER THING. THAT WAS WHAT HAD BOTH OF US ON THE EDGE.
THE POSSIBILITY OF THE TALK.
IN HINDSIGHT, MAYBE THAT WAS WHY MY FIRST PIECE OF CRAFTER GEAR WAS A BALLGAG?
CAN'T DO MUCH TALKING WITH ONE OF THOSE.
OKAY, I MAY BE OVERTHINKING THIS SHIT A BIT.
IN THE END, I MADE A SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE DECISION -- IF SHE DOESN'T BRING IT UP, I WON'T BRING IT UP.
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
HUH?
I MEAN... WE COULD JUST TRY TO IGNORE THE MASSIVE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM THAT WAS OUR UNRESOLVED RELATIONSHIP STATUS ON VALENTINE'S DAY AND JUST FOCUS ON OUR KINKIER PLANS.
IT COULD WORK.
CHRIS, MY DUDE, THAT'S SOME BAAAD TIMING!

THEN AGAIN...
SO...UHH... HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY?
choco hearts

UH?
JUST ME HERE!
GET IN!
WELL, AREN'T WE EXCITED!
YOU DIDN'T CALL ME, HOW DID YOU SNEAK IN?
I DIDN'T, I JUST ENTERED! SEE I WAS GONNA CALL YOU, BUT THEN I NOTICED A FEW GUYS WALK IN WITH THEIR GIRLFRIENDS AND ASKED HOW COME THEY WERE...YOU KNOW, JUST GOING IN.
ONE OF THEM TOLD ME THE OWNER POSTED A NOTICE THAT TODAY WAS AN EXCEPTION TO THE WHOLE "DUDES ONLY" RULE.
SO, YEAH... UH...S'PRISE?


AND LIKE I SAID....HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY?
YEAH, THERE WAS NO GOING AROUND IT...
I...UHH...
AFTER ALL, I CARED ABOUT HER.
I CARED ABOUT HER TOO MUCH TO NOT BE HONEST ABOUT THIS ONE BIG, IMPORTANT THING. EVEN IF IT ENDED UP ALIENATING US, I HAD TO SAY IT. I HAD TO, BECAUSE SHE WAS THE ONLY PERSON WITH WHOM I COULD BE HONEST ABOUT MYSELF BACK THEN. BECAUSE SHE WAS MY BEST FRIEND.
OKAY, LISTEN. I CAN'T DO THIS.
DO... WHAT?
YOU ARE WAY TOO IMPORTANT TO ME TO FUCKING LIE TO. THE TRUTH IS, ALLY, I...
I DON'T LOVE YOU...

OH, THANK GOD!
I....UH, WAIT WHAT?
I DON'T LOVE YOU, EITHER!!!
YOU...DON'T?
NO! I MEAN, I LOVE YOU, BUT LIKE A FRIEND? I DON'T, YOU KNOW...
...LOVE LOVE YOU! I KNOW! LIKE NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY, I JUST CAN'T IMAGINE SNUGGLING NEXT TO YOU, OR LIKE, JUST SPOONING AND BEING ALL LOVEY-DOVEY AND SHIT.
RIGHT?
OR HAVING A ROMANTIC CANDLELIT DINNER!
LIKE, HONESTLY, I CAN'T EVEN SAY THAT I FIND YOU PARTICULARLY SEXUALLY APPEALING! LET ALONE ANYTHING ELSE!

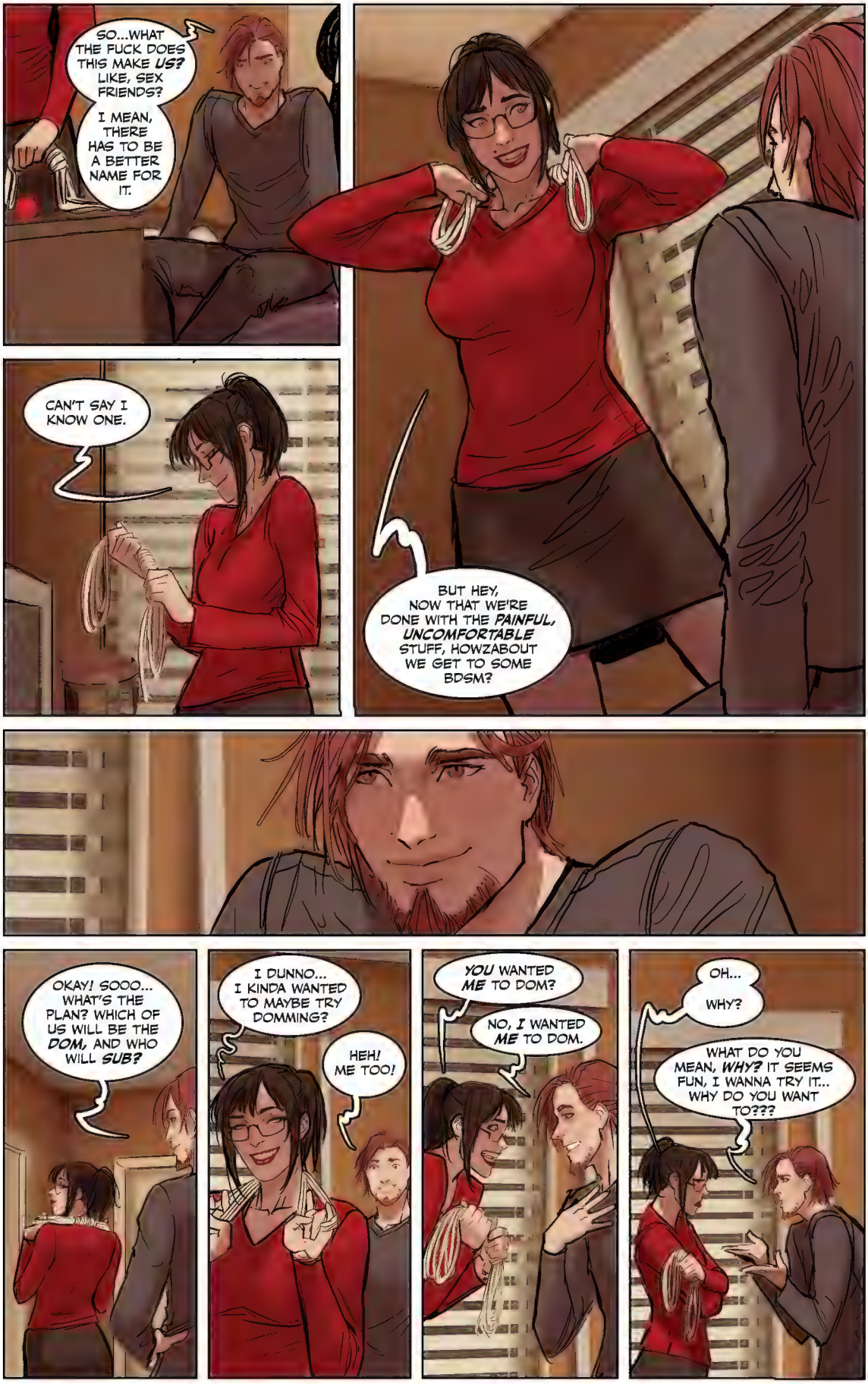


AND DON'T GET ME WRONG -- I'M SURE SOME GIRL WILL GO WEAK IN THE KNEES AND NIAGARA FALLS BETWEEN HER LEGS ABOUT YOU, BUT TO ME YOU ARE LIKE...

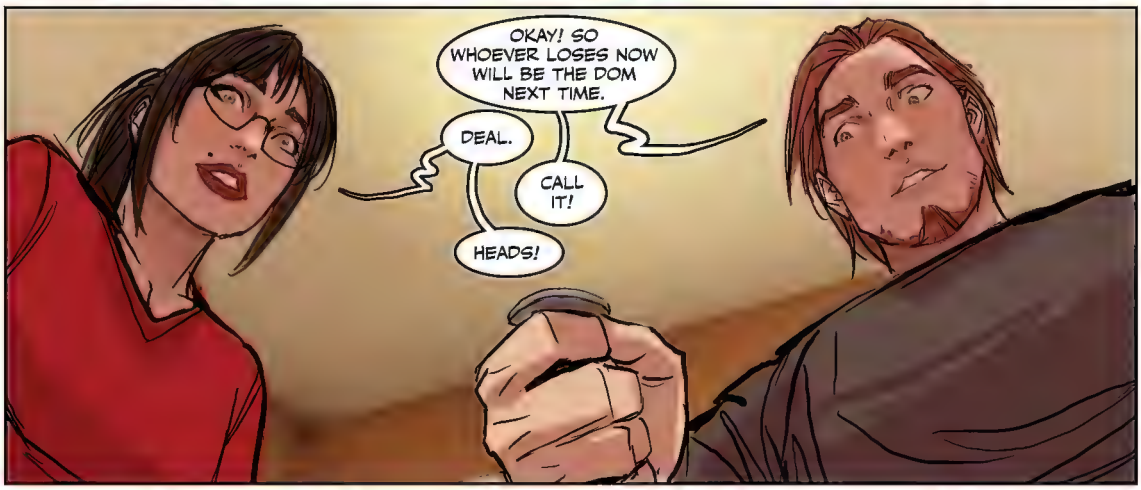
UH...

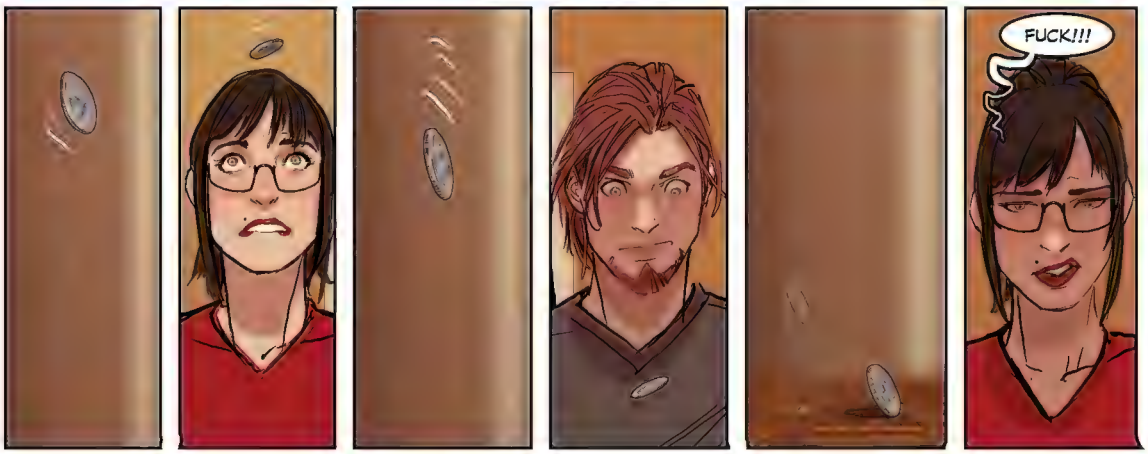
A *VIBRATOR* WITH MY BEST FRIEND ATTACHED TO IT.

ABSOLUTE DESTRUCTION!


SO...WHAT THE FUCK DOES THIS MAKE *US?* LIKE, SEX FRIENDS?
I MEAN, THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER NAME FOR IT.
CAN'T SAY I KNOW ONE.
BUT HEY, NOW THAT WE'RE DONE WITH THE *PAINFUL, UNCOMFORTABLE* STUFF, HOWZABOUT WE GET TO SOME BDSM?
OKAY! SOOO... WHAT'S THE PLAN? WHICH OF US WILL BE THE *DOM,* AND WHO WILL *SUB?*
I DUNNO... I KINDA WANTED TO MAYBE TRY DOMMING?
HEH! ME TOO!
YOU WANTED *ME* TO DOM?
NO, *I* WANTED *ME* TO DOM.
OH...
WHY?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, *WHY?* IT SEEMS FUN, I WANNA TRY IT... WHY DO YOU WANT TO???

UH...FAIR ENOUGH.
SO, NOW WHAT...


OKAY! SO WHOEVER LOSES NOW WILL BE THE DOM NEXT TIME.
DEAL.
CALL IT!
HEADS!

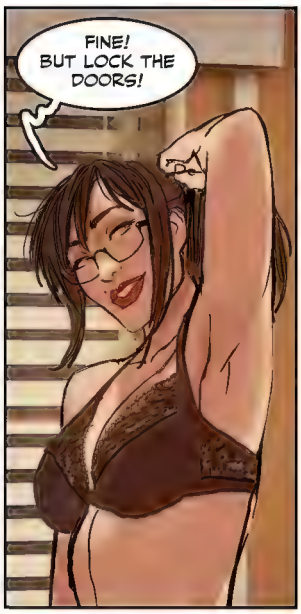

FUCK!!!

FINE... YOUR ASS IS MINE *NEXT TIME!*

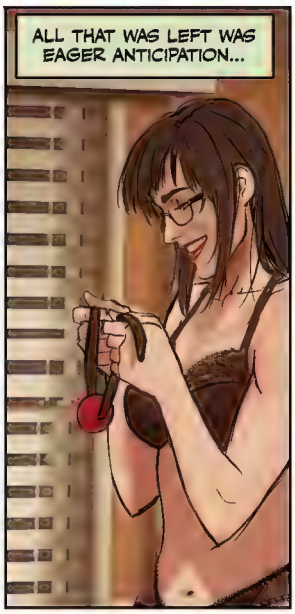
FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING?
MAYBE.
COME ON! I'LL START *STRIPPING,* YOU GET THE ROPES AND CONDOMS READY, I GUESS.
YOU GOT IT!

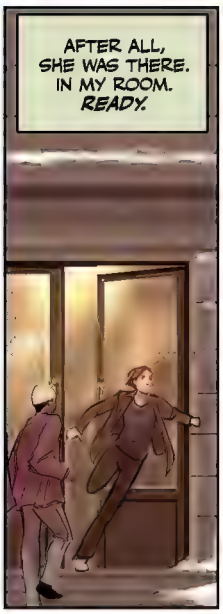
WAIT!

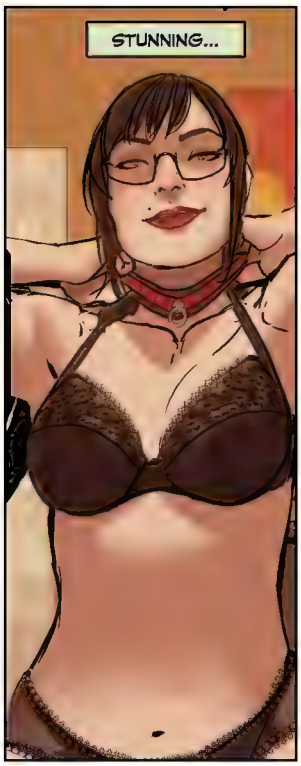
FUCK! HOLD THAT THOUGHT! I'LL BE RIGHT BACK!


FINE! BUT LOCK THE DOORS!

THE STRESS OF THE WHOLE THING HAD MADE ME TOO DISTRACTED TO RESUPPLY. BUT THAT STRESS WAS NOW GONE AND FORGOTTEN.


ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS EAGER ANTICIPATION...


AFTER ALL, SHE WAS THERE. IN MY ROOM. *READY.*

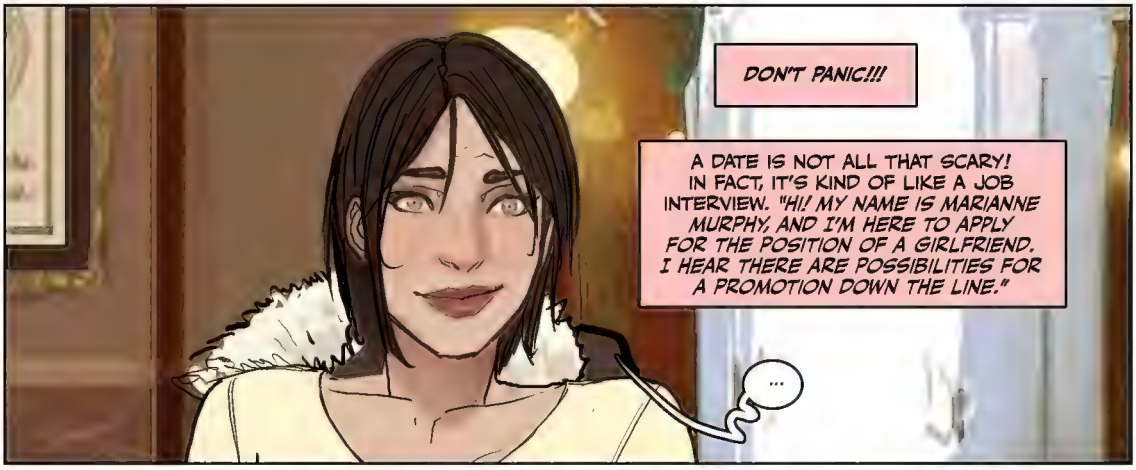

STUNNING...

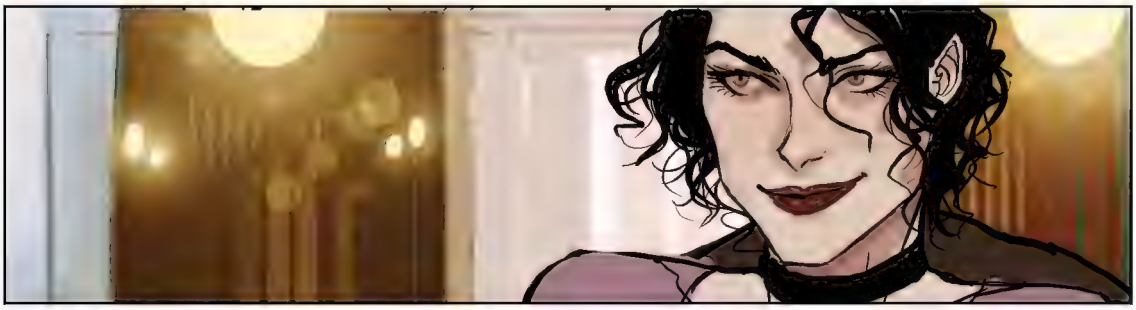
AND ALL I HAD TO DO WAS *NOT FUCK IT UP.*
BE A TERRIBLE DOM...
LIKE...MESS UP THE KNOTS AND MAKE IT ALL UNCOMFORTABLE.
OR COME IN WITH NO IDEA FOR WHAT WE SHOULD DO...

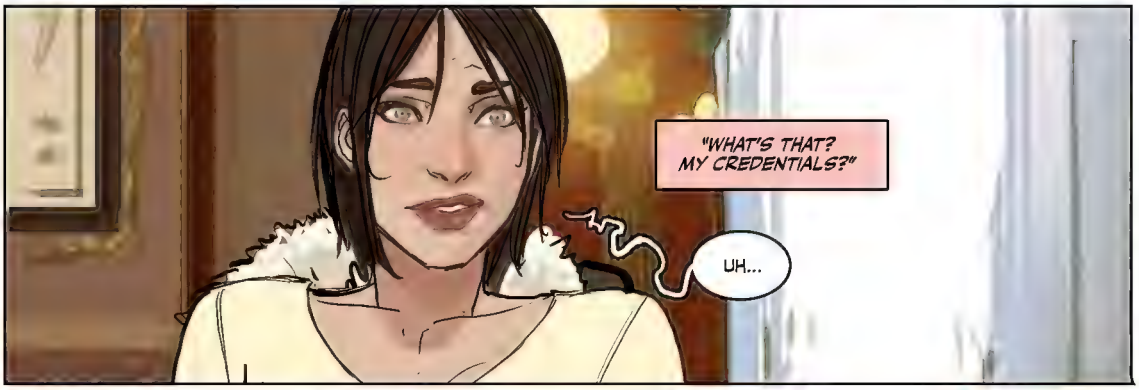
PLUS, I WAS ABOUT TO PARTAKE IN MY *ONE TRUE FETISH.*
I WASN'T REALLY SEXUALLY EXPERIENCED, SO FINISHING EARLY WAS AN EVER-PRESENT DANGER ON ANY DAY...BUT WITH THIS...

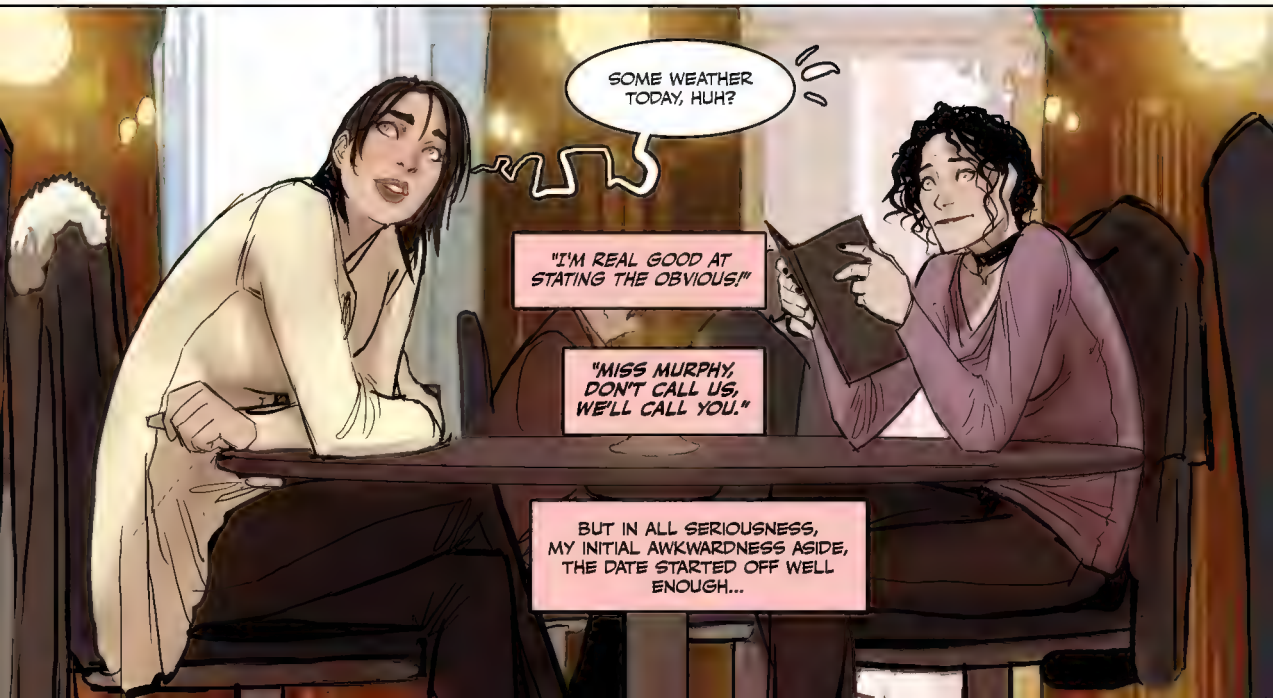
UNDERSTANDABLY, BY THE TIME I CAME BACK TO THE ROOM, MY EAGER ANTICIPATION WAS SLOWLY BUT SURELY REPLACED WITH A CHILLING, CRAWLING SENSE OF...
GOT 'EM!
SLAM

PANIC!
WELL, THEN, SHALL WE BEGIN, MASTER?


DON'T PANIC!!!
A DATE IS NOT ALL THAT SCARY! IN FACT, IT'S KIND OF LIKE A JOB INTERVIEW. "HI! MY NAME IS MARIANNE MURPHY, AND I'M HERE TO APPLY FOR THE POSITION OF A GIRLFRIEND. I HEAR THERE ARE POSSIBILITIES FOR A PROMOTION DOWN THE LINE."
...



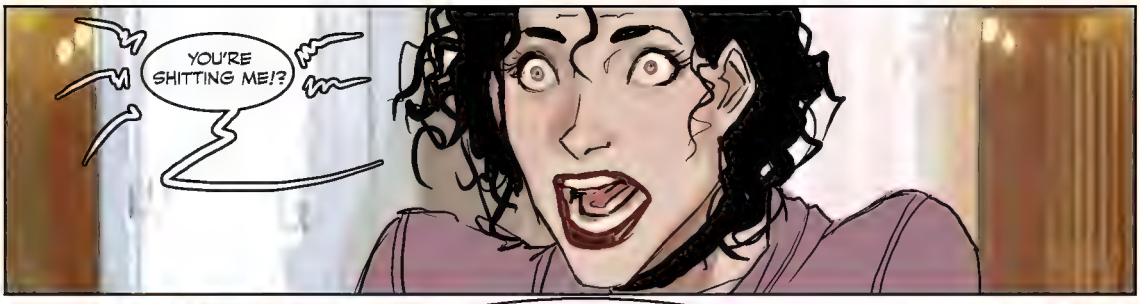

"WHAT'S THAT? MY CREDENTIALS?"
UH...

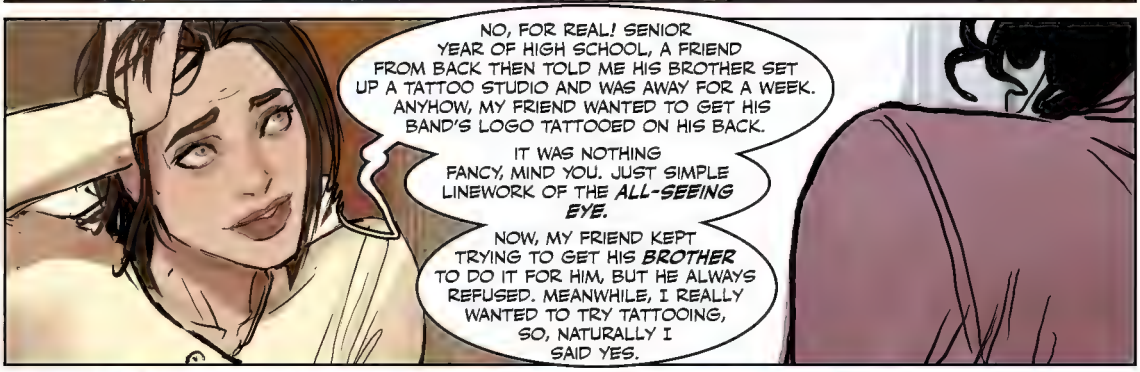

SOME WEATHER TODAY, HUH?
"I'M REAL GOOD AT STATING THE OBVIOUS!"
"MISS MURPHY, DON'T CALL US, WE'LL CALL YOU."
BUT IN ALL SERIOUSNESS, MY INITIAL AWKWARDNESS ASIDE, THE DATE STARTED OFF WELL ENOUGH...

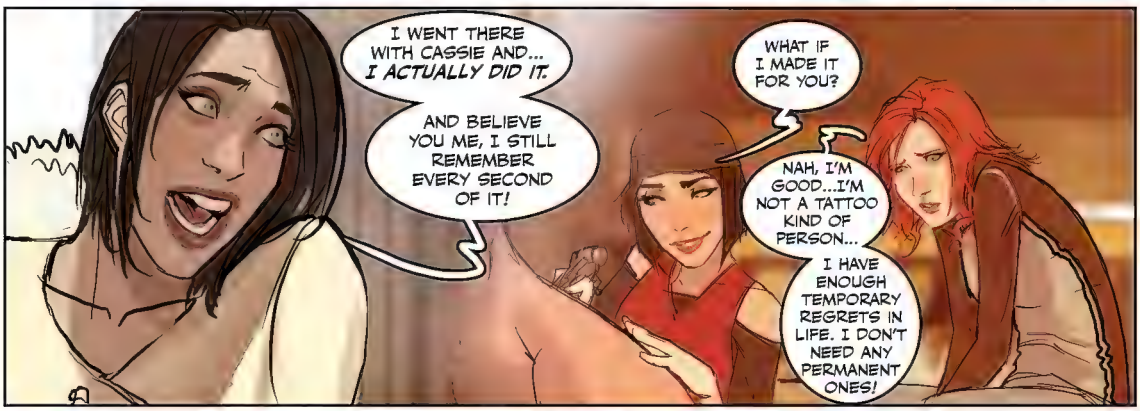
OH, GOD... I DID NOT JUST SAY THAT...
PFFF...
NO, NO... IT'S ALL GOOD. "NOW HERE'S JANICE WITH THE TRAFFIC REPORT!"
HEY, I'M NOT ALL THAT USED TO DATING! I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU DO BETTER!
MARIANNE, YOU OPENED WITH THE WEATHER... IT'S NOT MUCH OF A CHALLENGE.
WELL, YEAH! WEATHER! AS IN SNOW, AND ICE, AND I WAS TRYING TO BREAK THE ICE. IT'S ACTUALLY CLEVER IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT...
AND NOW IT'S GETTING KINDA SAD.
AGAIN, STILL A BETTER ICEBREAKER THAN YOURS.
HEH!
PUT UP OR SHUT UP, THEN? HUH?
FINE. I SEE YOUR WEATHER REPORT, AND I'LL RAISE YOU...
...
UH... LAURA? SOMETHING WRONG?
WHAT? OH...
NO...
IT'S FINE...UM... YEAH! YOU'LL LOVE THIS!

WAIT! THAT'S... THAT'S YOU AND MIRIAM!?
HOLY CRAP... WHEN WAS THIS?
ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO. IT'S FROM ONE OF THEIR EARLY GIGS!
HAH! THAT'S COOL. SO THAT'S YOU AT MY AGE.
SO, WHO'S THE PIXIE?
JUST A... FORMER ACQUAINTANCE.
THAT'S AN ODD WAY OF INTRODUCING SOMEONE.
STILL TRUE. I USED TO HANG OUT WITH HER AND I NO LONGER DO THAT. ANYWAYS...LET'S ORDER.
I'LL HAVE...
THE UNDERAGE YOUNG LADY HERE WILL HAVE A DIET COKE AND AN APPLE MARTINI FOR ME.
HEY, LAURA...HERE'S A THING TO STIR YOUR MARTINI.
NOW, NOW, DON'T FROWN, YOU BUY ME FOUR MORE OF THOSE AND YOUR CHANCES OF SEEING A NAKED LADY TONIGHT WILL GROW EXPONENTIALLY.

OH, PLEASE! I SEE A NAKED LADY EVERY TUESDAY AND THURSDAY FOR FREE...ISH.
?
ART CLASSES. MY BEST FRIEND IS ACTUALLY ONE OF OUR MODELS.
SO, I SEE PLENTY OF HER NAKED BUTT.
OH? YOU'RE SOME KIND OF AN ARTIST?
WELL... HOPING TO BE ONE.
IT'S A ROUGH MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB...
BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST, I MEAN.
WELL, AREN'T YOU THE SUPPORTIVE ONE?
NO, SORRY, WHAT I MEAN IS, I RUN A TATTOO SHOP, AND I HEAR STORIES.
TATTOO SHOP?
YEAH? EVER THOUGHT OF TRYING IT? TATTOOING, I MEAN.
THOUGHT OF IT? PLEASE!
I ACTUALLY DID IT! ONCE.


YOU'RE SHITTING ME!?

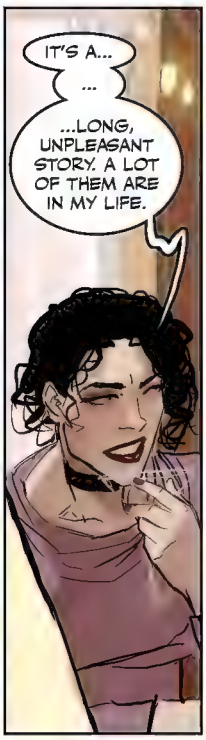

NO, FOR REAL! SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, A FRIEND FROM BACK THEN TOLD ME HIS BROTHER SET UP A TATTOO STUDIO AND WAS AWAY FOR A WEEK. ANYHOW, MY FRIEND WANTED TO GET HIS BAND'S LOGO TATTOOED ON HIS BACK.
IT WAS NOTHING FANCY, MIND YOU. JUST SIMPLE LINEWORK OF THE ALL-SEEING EYE.
NOW, MY FRIEND KEPT TRYING TO GET HIS BROTHER TO DO IT FOR HIM, BUT HE ALWAYS REFUSED. MEANWHILE, I REALLY WANTED TO TRY TATTOOING, SO, NATURALLY I SAID YES.

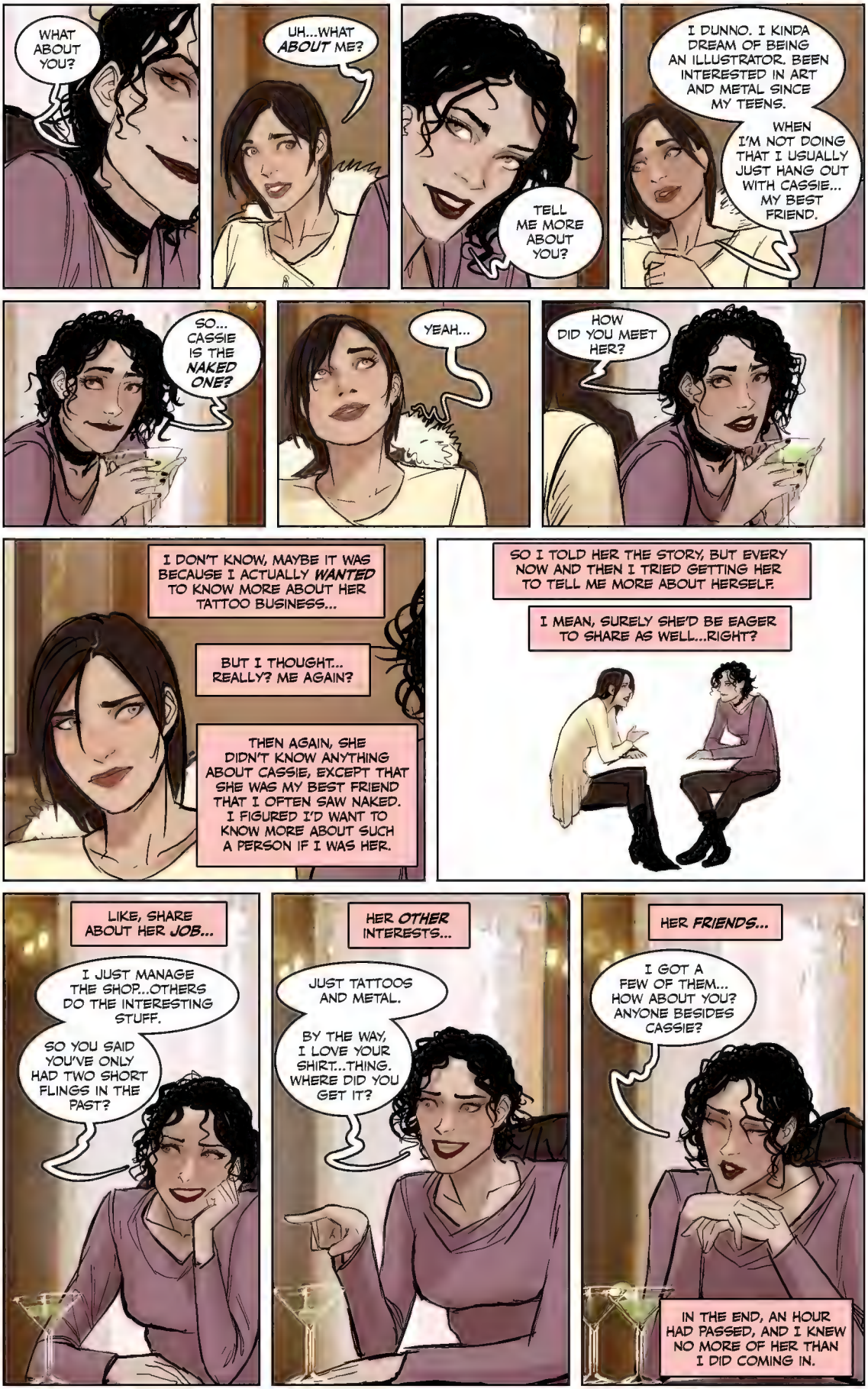

I WENT THERE WITH CASSIE AND... I ACTUALLY DID IT.
AND BELIEVE YOU ME, I STILL REMEMBER EVERY SECOND OF IT!
WHAT IF I MADE IT FOR YOU?
NAH, I'M GOOD...I'M NOT A TATTOO KIND OF PERSON...
I HAVE ENOUGH TEMPORARY REGRETS IN LIFE. I DON'T NEED ANY PERMANENT ONES!

THE WHOLE TIME I WAS MAKING DUMB JOKES, TEASING CASSIE, DOING ANYTHING TO DISTRACT MYSELF FROM DEALING WITH THE INTERNAL FREAKOUT I WAS HAVING AT THE MOMENT.
I MEAN, ANY WAY YOU PUT IT, THIS WAS WEIRD.
LIKE, I'M DRAWING ON THIS DUDE... WITH A NEEDLE!
I CONSTANTLY HAD THIS VISION OF MYSELF PRESSING DOWN TOO HARD AND TEARING HIS SKIN APART.
IN MY MIND, I SAW EMERGENCY ROOMS!
BLOOD EVERYWHERE!
I HAD ACTUAL NIGHTMARES ABOUT IT LATER!

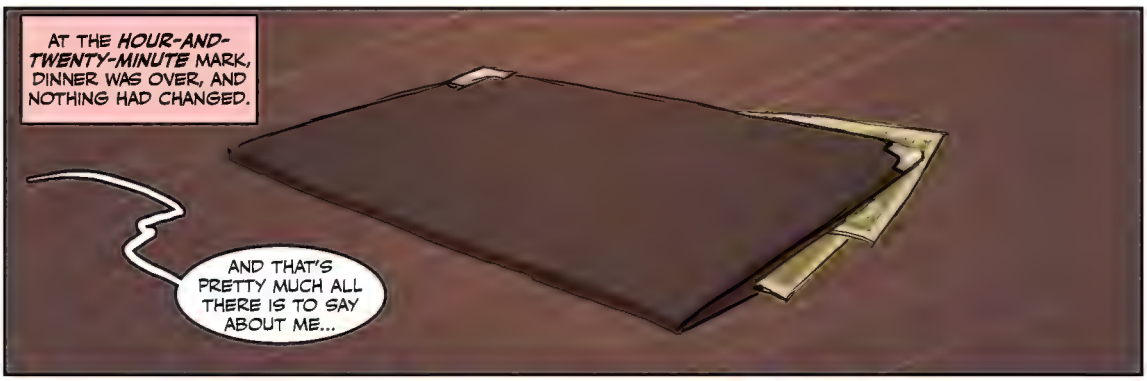
HAHHAHA
OH, GOD... YOU REALLY ARE SOMETHING, MARIANNE!

HEH...I NEVER TOLD THAT PART TO ANYONE BEFORE.
NOT EVEN CASSIE.
SO WHAT ABOUT YOU? HOW DID YOU END UP RUNNING A TATTOO SHOP?


IT'S A...
...
...LONG, UNPLEASANT STORY. A LOT OF THEM ARE IN MY LIFE.


WHAT ABOUT YOU?
UH...WHAT ABOUT ME?
TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOU?
I DUNNO. I KINDA DREAM OF BEING AN ILLUSTRATOR. BEEN INTERESTED IN ART AND METAL SINCE MY TEENS.
WHEN I'M NOT DOING THAT I USUALLY JUST HANG OUT WITH CASSIE... MY BEST FRIEND.
SO... CASSIE IS THE NAKED ONE?
YEAH...
HOW DID YOU MEET HER?
I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE IT WAS BECAUSE I ACTUALLY WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HER TATTOO BUSINESS...
BUT I THOUGHT... REALLY? ME AGAIN?
THEN AGAIN, SHE DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT CASSIE, EXCEPT THAT SHE WAS MY BEST FRIEND THAT I OFTEN SAW NAKED. I FIGURED I'D WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT SUCH A PERSON IF I WAS HER.
SO I TOLD HER THE STORY, BUT EVERY NOW AND THEN I TRIED GETTING HER TO TELL ME MORE ABOUT HERSELF.
I MEAN, SURELY SHE'D BE EAGER TO SHARE AS WELL...RIGHT?
LIKE, SHARE ABOUT HER JOB...
I JUST MANAGE THE SHOP...OTHERS DO THE INTERESTING STUFF.
SO YOU SAID YOU'VE ONLY HAD TWO SHORT FLINGS IN THE PAST?
HER OTHER INTERESTS...
JUST TATTOOS AND METAL.
BY THE WAY, I LOVE YOUR SHIRT...THING. WHERE DID YOU GET IT?
HER FRIENDS...
I GOT A FEW OF THEM... HOW ABOUT YOU? ANYONE BESIDES CASSIE?
IN THE END, AN HOUR HAD PASSED, AND I KNEW NO MORE OF HER THAN I DID COMING IN.

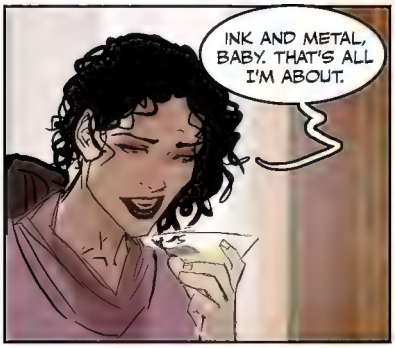
AND I WAS, UH... WELL, I WAS SUPPRESSING SOME FEELINGS ABOUT THAT.

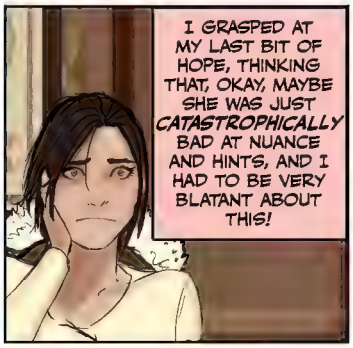

AT THE *HOUR-AND-TWENTY-MINUTE* MARK, DINNER WAS OVER, AND NOTHING HAD CHANGED.
AND THAT'S PRETTY MUCH ALL THERE IS TO SAY ABOUT ME...

UH...SO YOU WANNA CHIP IN?

I DID!

NOT THE *MONEY!* I TOLD YOU A LOT ABOUT MYSELF SO, I DON'T KNOW...I FIGURED YOU WANTED TO...YOU KNOW... SHARE SOME ABOUT YOU.


INK AND METAL, BABY. THAT'S ALL I'M ABOUT.


I GRASPED AT MY LAST BIT OF HOPE, THINKING THAT, OKAY, MAYBE SHE WAS JUST *CATASTROPHICALLY* BAD AT NUANCE AND HINTS, AND I HAD TO BE VERY BLATANT ABOUT THIS!

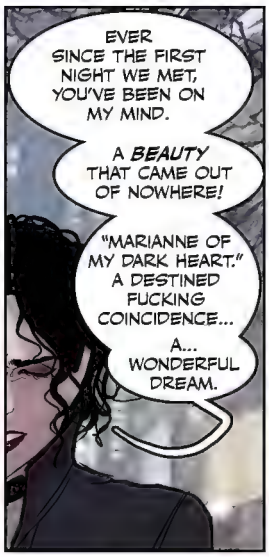
I KNOW BUT...I MEAN...I WANNA GET TO KNOW YOU. LIKE, AS A PERSON, I DON'T KNOW, THAT WAS SORT OF THE POINT OF... WELL, *ALL OF THIS.*

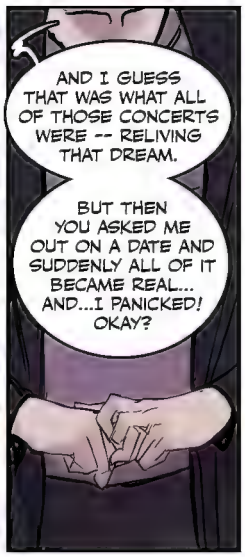
LIKE I SAID... ALL I'M ABOUT IS *INK* AND *METAL*.
LAURA, AM I DOING SOMETHING *WRONG* HERE, CAUSE... I DON'T KNOW THIS FEELS ONE-SIDED AS HELL RIGHT NOW.
HUH? NO, YOU'RE FINE! THIS IS FINE!
REALLY? 'CAUSE I JUST SPENT OVER AN HOUR TALKING ABOUT MYSELF, AND YOU AVOIDED SAYING PRETTY MUCH *ANYTHING* ABOUT YOURSELF. AT THE MOMENT I'M THINKING EITHER YOU'RE A GOVERNMENT SPY...OR MAYBE THIS WAS ALL A BIG MISTAKE.
I...
FAIR ENOUGH.
MARIANNE!
GOODBYE, LAURA.

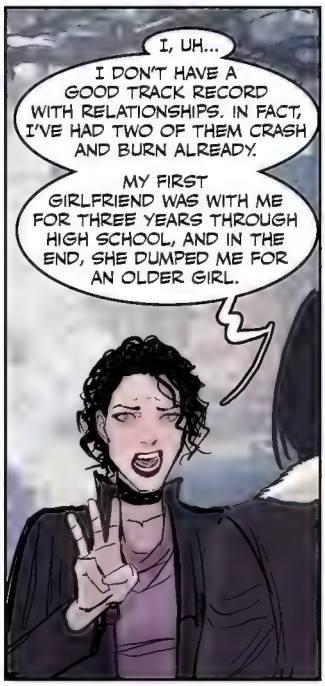
MARIANNE!
FUCK...
FUCK...
FUCK!!!
MARIANNE, WAIT!
NO, LAURA! YOU SAID WHAT YOU WANTED TO SAY, AND APPARENTLY THAT WAS NOTHING!
SO, JUST...
LEAVE ME ALONE!
JUST GIVE ME THIS ONE MOMENT, PLEASE!
IF YOU EVER FELT THERE COULD BE SOMETHING MORE BETWEEN US, GIVE ME THIS ONE CHANCE!
I'LL TELL YOU, OKAY?
THING IS...

YOU... SCARE ME!

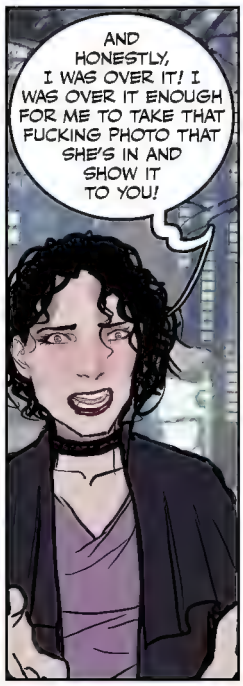
WHAT?


EVER SINCE THE FIRST NIGHT WE MET, YOU'VE BEEN ON MY MIND.
A BEAUTY THAT CAME OUT OF NOWHERE!
"MARIANNE OF MY DARK HEART." A DESTINED FUCKING COINCIDENCE...
A... WONDERFUL DREAM.


AND I GUESS THAT WAS WHAT ALL OF THOSE CONCERTS WERE -- RELIVING THAT DREAM.
BUT THEN YOU ASKED ME OUT ON A DATE AND SUDDENLY ALL OF IT BECAME REAL... AND...I PANICKED! OKAY?

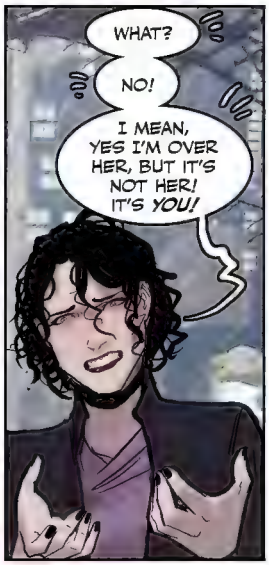

I, UH...
I DON'T HAVE A GOOD TRACK RECORD WITH RELATIONSHIPS. IN FACT, I'VE HAD TWO OF THEM CRASH AND BURN ALREADY.
MY FIRST GIRLFRIEND WAS WITH ME FOR THREE YEARS THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, AND IN THE END, SHE DUMPED ME FOR AN OLDER GIRL.

MY SECOND GIRLFRIEND WAS THE GIRL IN THAT PHOTO. WE SPENT TWO YEARS TOGETHER, UNTIL I FOUND OUT I WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A FUCKING PROLONGED "BISEXUAL PHASE" FOR HER. SHE CHEATED ON ME WITH SOME BASS PLAYER FOR A SHITTY PUNK BAND.


AND HONESTLY, I WAS OVER IT! I WAS OVER IT ENOUGH FOR ME TO TAKE THAT FUCKING PHOTO THAT SHE'S IN AND SHOW IT TO YOU!

BUT THEN I PULLED THE DAMNED THING OUT AND I FUCKING FROZE AGAIN!

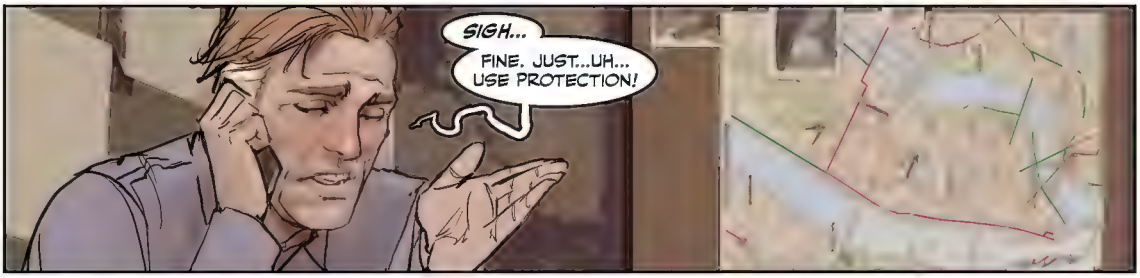
SO, YOU'RE NOT OVER HER?

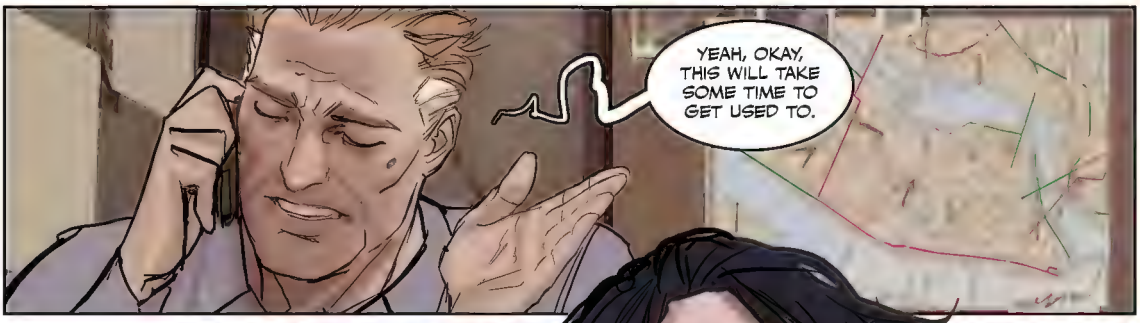
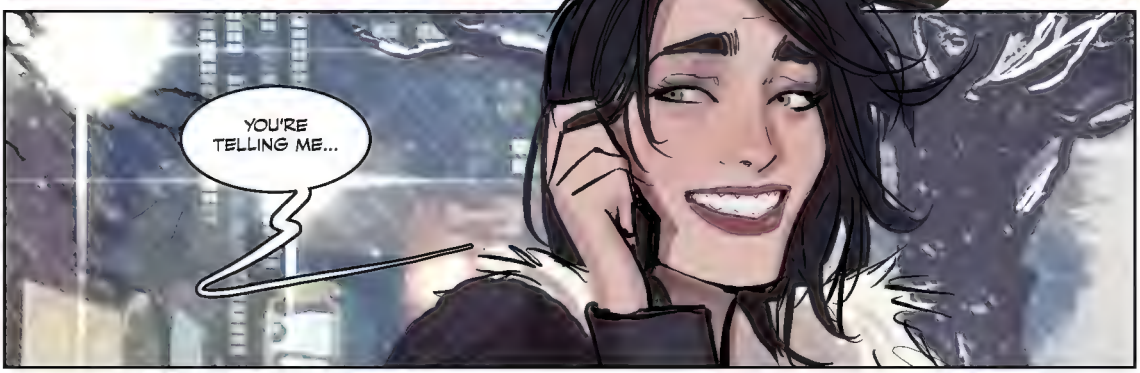

WHAT?
NO!
I MEAN, YES I'M OVER HER, BUT IT'S NOT HER! IT'S YOU!

SEE, I KNOW I'M A LITTLE WALLED OFF, BUT....NOT BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE YOU... IT'S...
WHAT?
YOU GOT HEARTBREAK WRITTEN ALL OVER YOU!
'SCUSE ME?
ARGH...LISTEN, ON ANY GIVEN DAY, CHANCES OF FINDING ANOTHER LESBIAN IN THE WILD ARE SHIT AS IT IS, BUT FINDING SOMEONE LIKE YOU...
SOMEONE LIKE ME?
SOMEONE PERFECT!!!!
UH...OKAY, BUT...YOU CALLED ME A LESBIAN, CARDS ON THE TABLE --
I'M BI.
I CAN FIX THAT!
IT'S NOT BROKEN.
MMMGH!!!
MARIANNE, WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS, YOU ARE EVERYTHING I COULD HAVE WISHED FOR! AND IT SCARES ME!
THAT'S WHY I WAS SO EVASIVE, OKAY? BECAUSE IF YOU KNEW ABOUT ALL OF MY PREVIOUS EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE I FEARED YOU WOULD BAIL!
SO, YEAH. THERE! I'M A MESS.
I'VE FALLEN FOR YOU, AND HERE I AM RUINING IT, BECAUSE I'M ALREADY AFRAID OF LOSING YOU, AND...
UMF?
LAURA...
SHUT THE FUCK UP AND KISS ME!

IT WAS A BAD DATE. A FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCE. I WANTED TO KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT HER, YET IN THE END, I LEARNED SO LITTLE...
BUT THE LITTLE BIT I LEARNED WAS SO IMPORTANT...
I LEARNED THAT SHE WAS A BIT OF AN EMOTIONAL MESS...
SHE WAS AFRAID OF BEING HURT AGAIN...
SHE HAD AN UNREALISTIC, IDEALIZED OPINION OF ME...
AND I LEARNED WHAT A KISS FELT LIKE WHEN YOU'VE JUST FALLEN IN LOVE.
THERE WAS NO MUSIC THIS TIME.
NO CHEERING CROWD. BUT I SWEAR, AS SHE KISSED ME, I COULD HEAR IT ALL SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE...OR MAYBE CLOSER...BUT QUIET...BETWEEN THE HEARTBEATS.
A FAMILIAR SONG...OUR SONG. A LYRIC ECHOING IN THE DISTANCE -- "I REMEMBER THE TIME..."
IT WAS ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL.

COME TO MY PLACE TONIGHT!
OH -- OKAY...
UH, WAIT! UHH...I KINDA GOTTA CALL MY DAD FIRST.
KHM...
SHUT IT!
HEY, MARIANNE. EVERYTHING OKAY?
YEAH DAD, JUST CALLING TO TELL YOU NOT TO...UH... EXPECT ME HOME TONIGHT.
YOU ARE GOING TO SPEND THE NIGHT AT, UH... LAURA'S, WAS IT?
UHH...YEAH...
I SEE...I PRESUME FOR, UHHH...THOSE REASONS.

AHEM...
YEAH...
MOST LIKELY.

SIGH...
FINE. JUST...UH... USE PROTECTION!


YEAH, OKAY, THIS WILL TAKE SOME TIME TO GET USED TO.

YOU'RE TELLING ME...

SHE CALLED ME "MASTER"!
RIGHT!
THIS IS FINE.
YUP!
COME ON! DOMINANT THOUGHTS! DOMINANT WORDS!
FUCK, SHE'S HOT!
NO! DAMN IT! TAKE CONTROL OF THIS SITUATION! DOMINATE!!!
SO...MY FIRST EVER SESSION AS A DOM WAS OFF TO A PROMISING START...
EEEP!
ALAN?
DUDE? YOU OKAY?
Y-YEAH! NO, JUST UHHH...JUST FINE!

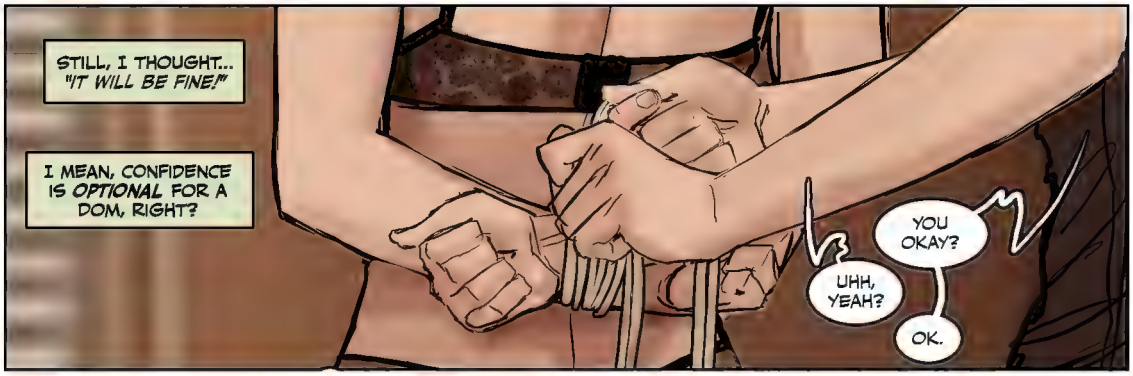
AND BELIEVE YOU ME, WHEN YOU ARE ROLEPLAYING, A COOL COSTUME WILL DO WONDERS FOR YOUR IMMERSION.

PROBLEM WAS, IN THIS LARP OF OURS, ALLY CAME DRESSED IN A FULL-ON LEATHER AND CHAINMAIL GETUP...

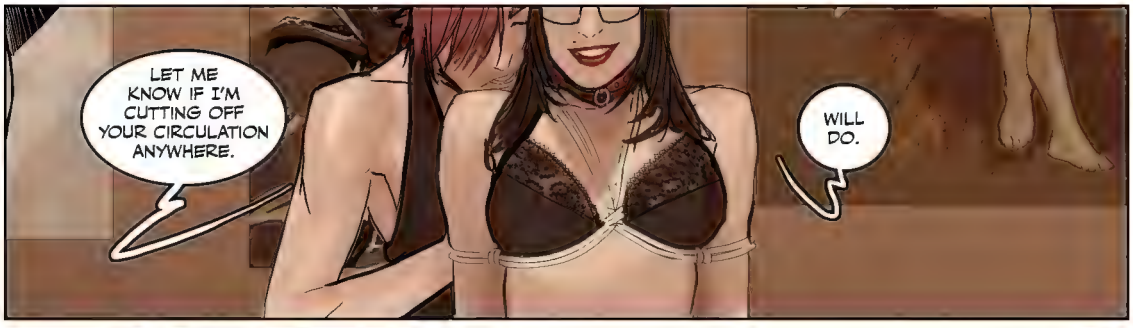
A BEAUTIFULLY-FRAMED, PICTURE-PERFECT IMAGE OF A KINKSTER READY TO PLAY. SHE WAS...WELL, *INTIMIDATINGLY GORGEOUS.*

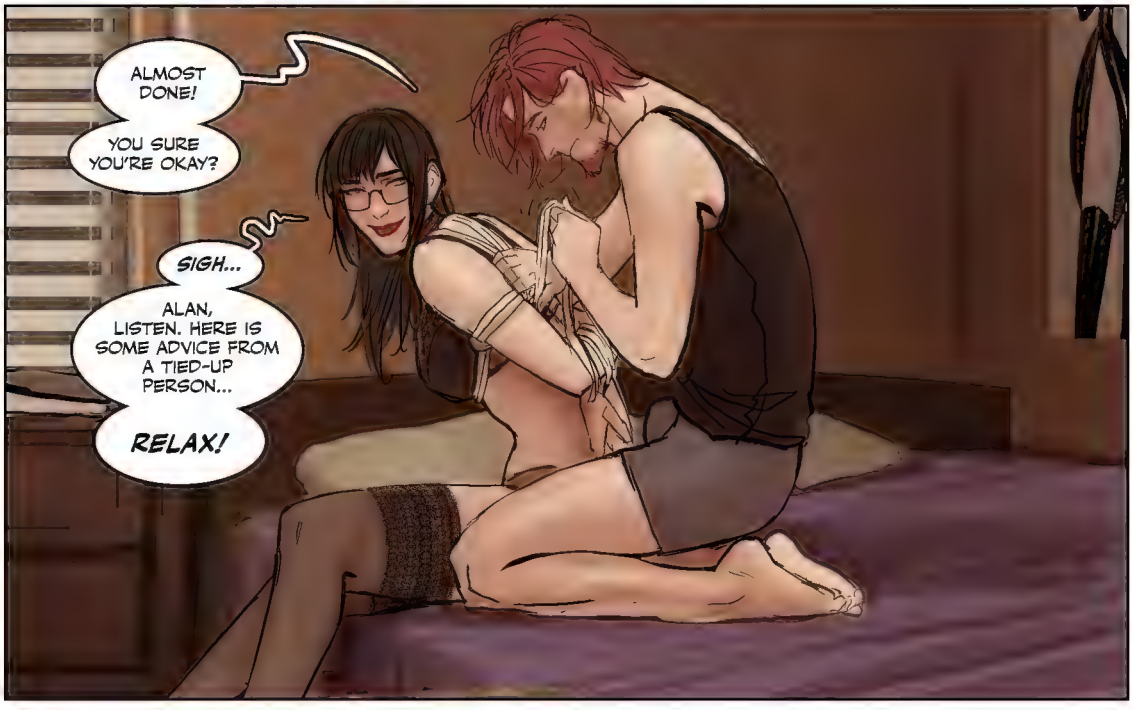
ME? I HAD A TANK TOP AND A BONER.

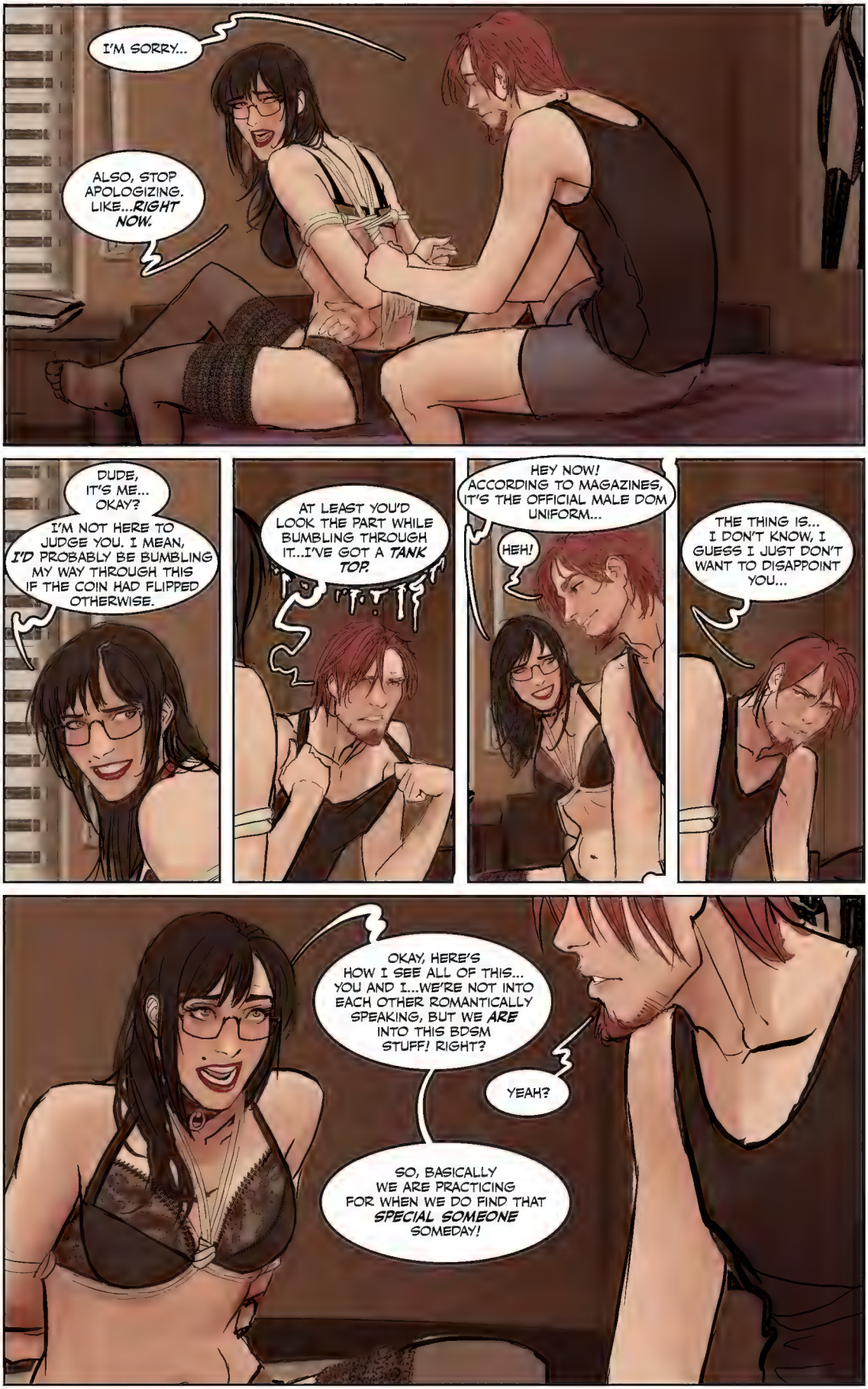
AND I WAS SUPPOSED TO RUN THIS GAME.

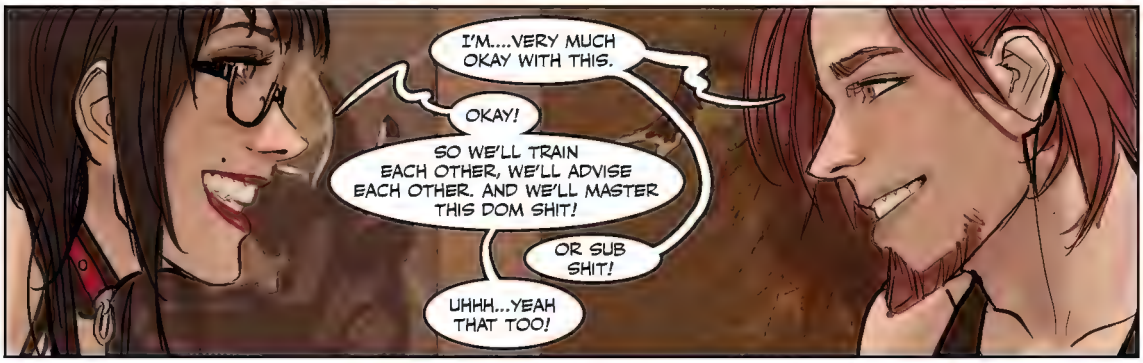

STILL, I THOUGHT... "IT WILL BE FINE!"
I MEAN, CONFIDENCE IS OPTIONAL FOR A DOM, RIGHT?
YOU OKAY?
UHH, YEAH?
OK.

THIS OKAY? I'M NOT STRAINING YOUR ARMS TOO HARD?
NAH. JUST FINE.


LET ME KNOW IF I'M CUTTING OFF YOUR CIRCULATION ANYWHERE.
WILL DO.

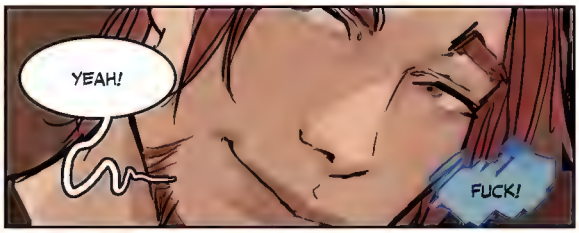

ALMOST DONE!
YOU SURE YOU'RE OKAY?
SIGH...
ALAN, LISTEN. HERE IS SOME ADVICE FROM A TIED-UP PERSON...
RELAX!


I'M SORRY...
ALSO, STOP APOLOGIZING. LIKE...RIGHT NOW.
DUDE, IT'S ME... OKAY?
I'M NOT HERE TO JUDGE YOU. I MEAN, I'D PROBABLY BE BUMBLING MY WAY THROUGH THIS IF THE COIN HAD FLIPPED OTHERWISE.
AT LEAST YOU'D LOOK THE PART WHILE BUMBLING THROUGH IT...I'VE GOT A TANK TOP.
HEY NOW! ACCORDING TO MAGAZINES, IT'S THE OFFICIAL MALE DOM UNIFORM...
HEH!
THE THING IS... I DON'T KNOW, I GUESS I JUST DON'T WANT TO DISAPPOINT YOU...
OKAY, HERE'S HOW I SEE ALL OF THIS... YOU AND I...WE'RE NOT INTO EACH OTHER ROMANTICALLY SPEAKING, BUT WE ARE INTO THIS BDSM STUFF! RIGHT?
YEAH?
SO, BASICALLY WE ARE PRACTICING FOR WHEN WE DO FIND THAT SPECIAL SOMEONE SOMEDAY!


I'M....VERY MUCH OKAY WITH THIS.
OKAY!
SO WE'LL TRAIN EACH OTHER, WE'LL ADVISE EACH OTHER. AND WE'LL MASTER THIS DOM SHIT!
OR SUB SHIT!
UHHH...YEAH THAT TOO!

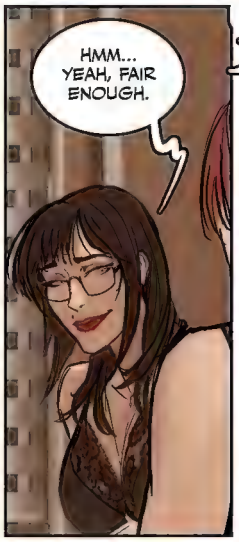
SOUNDS LIKE A DEAL TO ME!
SHAKE ON IT?
OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE!

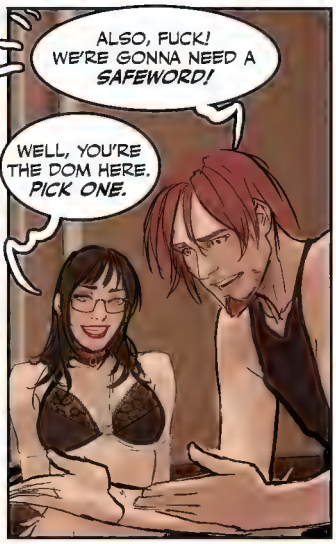
OKAY, YOU SEEM MORE RELAXED. SO, HOW 'BOUT WE GO AND DO SOME *FUN STUFF?*


YEAH!
FUCK!

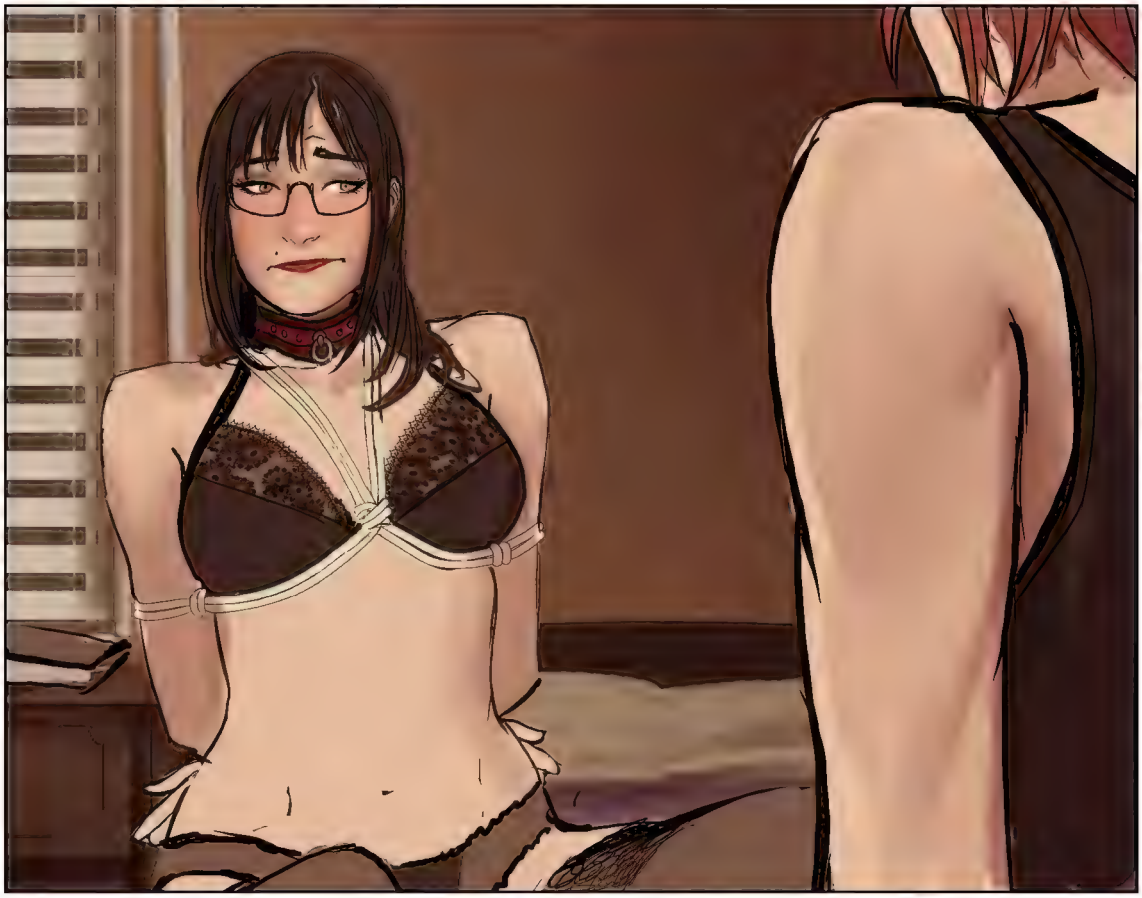
RIGHT...
WHAT'S WITH ME???
I HAVE NO IDEAS!!!
ARGH! STALL!

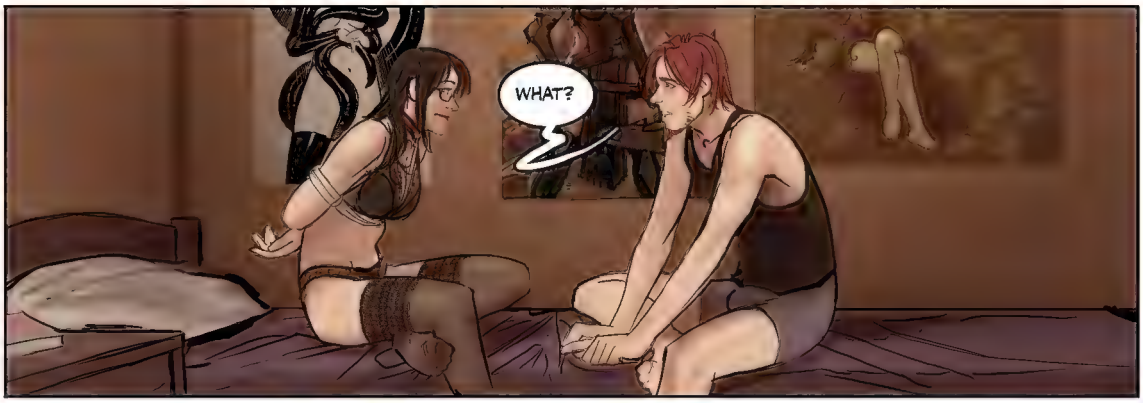
SO, I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD BE USING *THIS* QUITE YET.
YOU KNOW... FEEDBACK AND ALL.

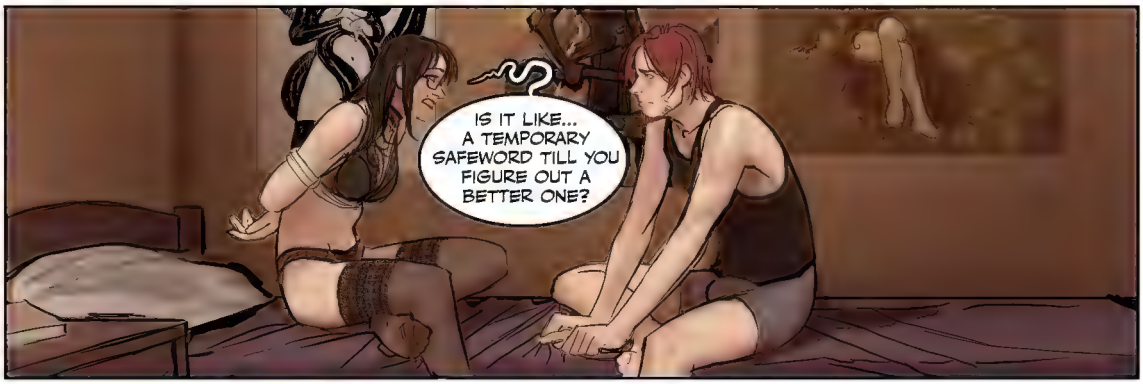

HMM... YEAH, FAIR ENOUGH.


ALSO, FUCK! WE'RE GONNA NEED A *SAFEWORD!*
WELL, YOU'RE THE DOM HERE. *PICK ONE.*

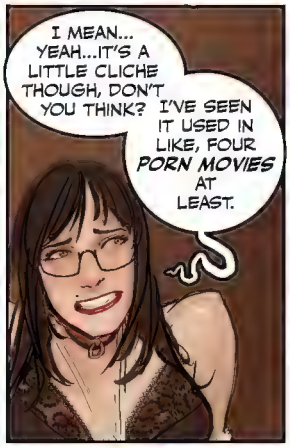
TO MY GREAT SURPRISE, THIS WAS EASY. I KNEW JUST THE SAFEWORD I WANTED. IT WAS THE RIGHT ONE FOR ME, EVEN THOUGH IT WASN'T A TERRIBLY ORIGINAL CHOICE.
I LIKED IT, BECAUSE IT WAS JUST UNCOMMON ENOUGH NOT TO BE MISTAKEN FOR SOMETHING ANYONE SAYS ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS. IT HAD THAT PLEADING VIBE TO IT THAT WOULD STOP THE GAME WITHOUT REALLY BREAKING THE MOOD...
MERCY! MY SAFEWORD IS GONNA BE MERCY!




WHAT?


IS IT LIKE... A TEMPORARY SAFEWORD TILL YOU FIGURE OUT A BETTER ONE?

HEY, IT'S A GOOD SAFEWORD!


I MEAN... YEAH...IT'S A LITTLE CLICHE THOUGH, DON'T YOU THINK?
I'VE SEEN IT USED IN LIKE, FOUR PORN MOVIES AT LEAST.

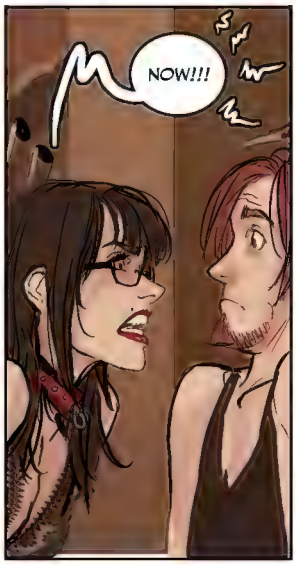
ALLY...

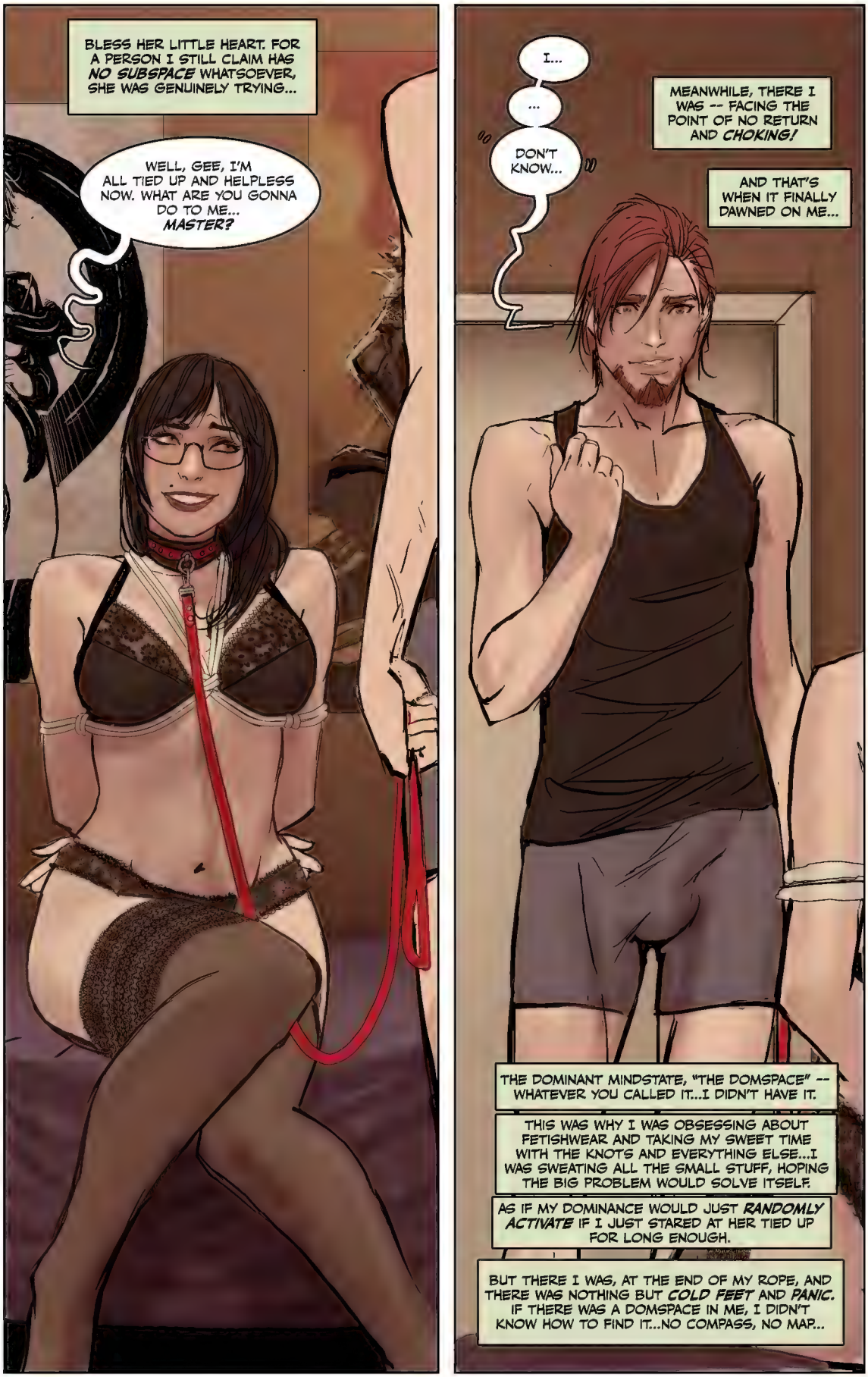
YOU WILL SAY "MERCY" OR I WILL SHOW YOU NONE.

WOW!

TOO MUCH?

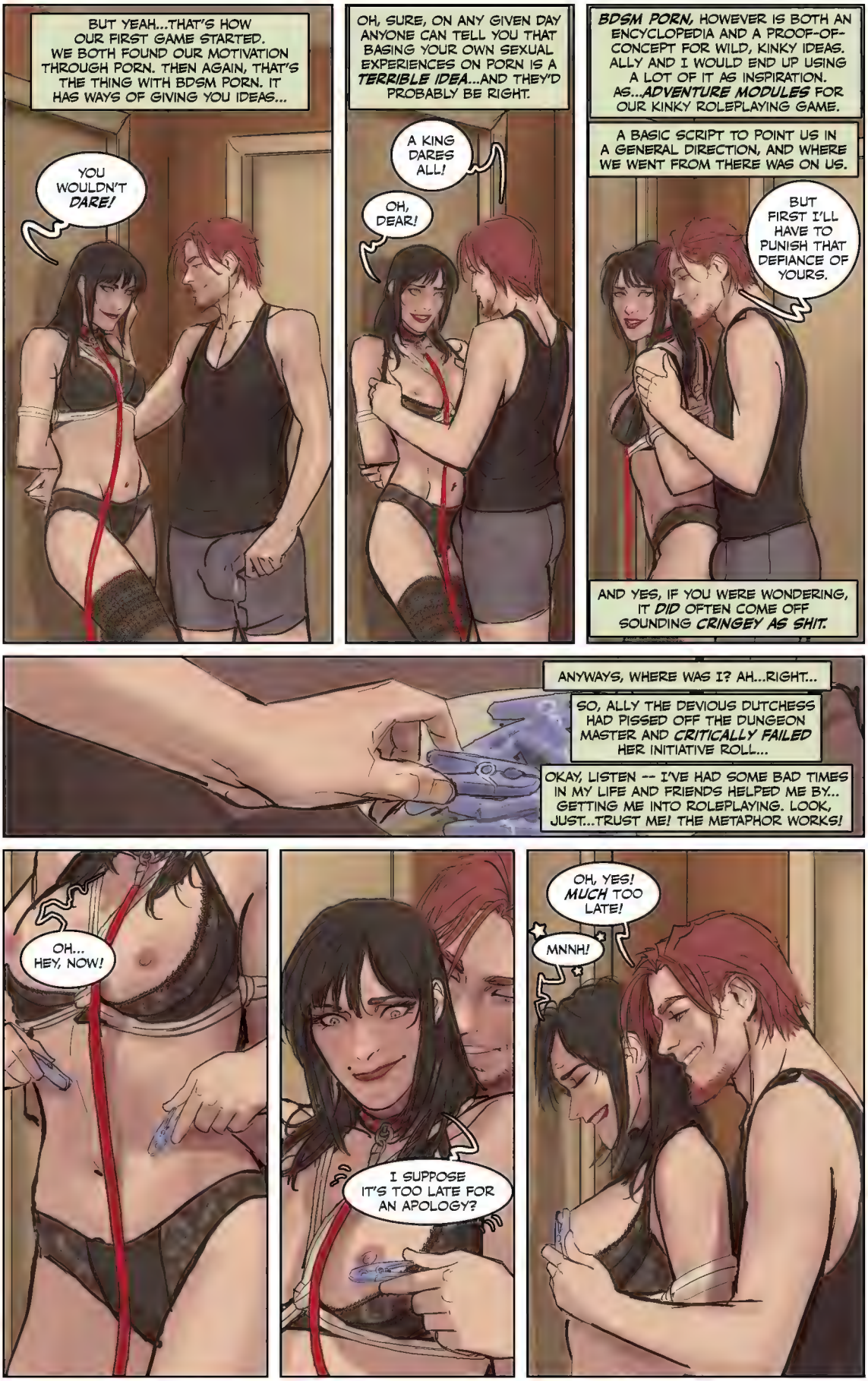
NONONO! KEEP AT IT, COME ON! THAT WAS IT, I SAW IT IN YOUR EYES, YOU WERE A DOM JUST THEN. COME ON, DON'T STOP! LEASH ME!

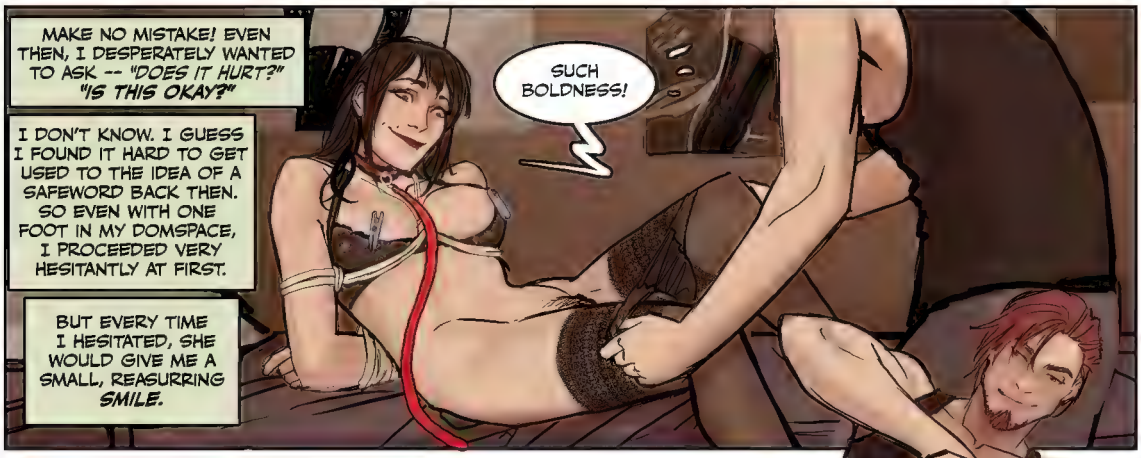

NOW!!!

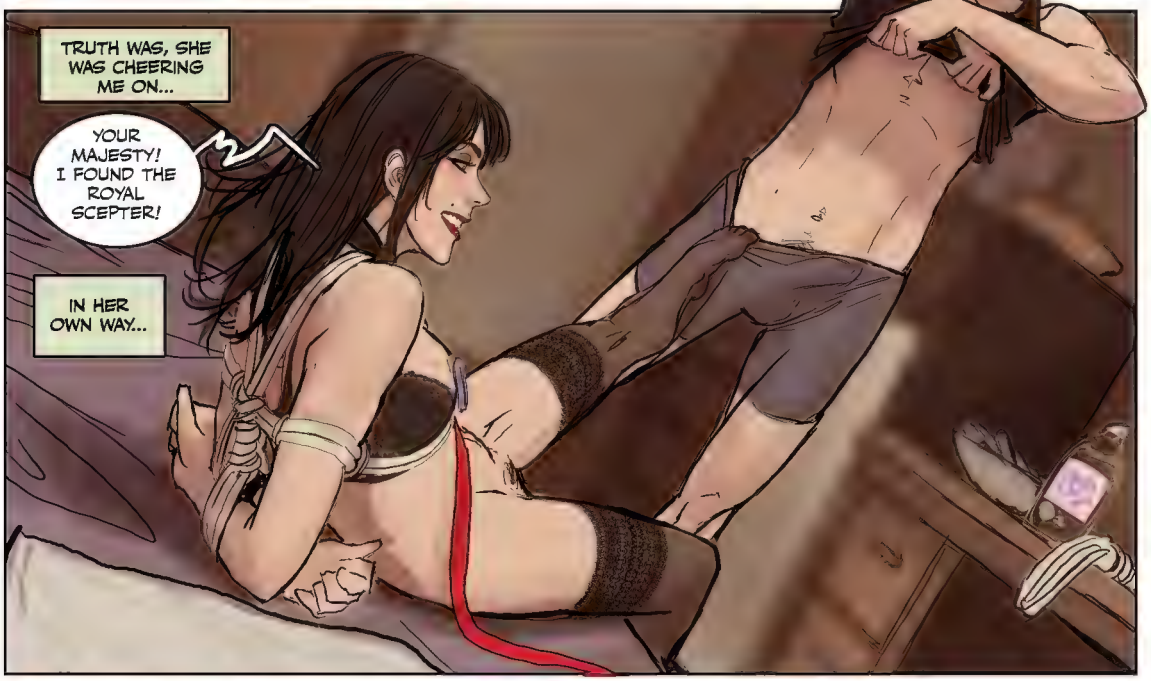

BLESS HER LITTLE HEART. FOR A PERSON I STILL CLAIM HAS NO SUBSPACE WHATSOEVER, SHE WAS GENUINELY TRYING...
WELL, GEE, I'M ALL TIED UP AND HELPLESS NOW. WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO TO ME... MASTER?
I...
...
DON'T KNOW...
MEANWHILE, THERE I WAS -- FACING THE POINT OF NO RETURN AND CHOKING!
AND THAT'S WHEN IT FINALLY DAWNED ON ME...
THE DOMINANT MINDSTATE, "THE DOMSPACE" -- WHATEVER YOU CALLED IT...I DIDN'T HAVE IT.
THIS WAS WHY I WAS OBSESSING ABOUT FETISHWEAR AND TAKING MY SWEET TIME WITH THE KNOTS AND EVERYTHING ELSE...I WAS SWEATING ALL THE SMALL STUFF, HOPING THE BIG PROBLEM WOULD SOLVE ITSELF.
AS IF MY DOMINANCE WOULD JUST RANDOMLY ACTIVATE IF I JUST STARED AT HER TIED UP FOR LONG ENOUGH.
BUT THERE I WAS, AT THE END OF MY ROPE, AND THERE WAS NOTHING BUT COLD FEET AND PANIC. IF THERE WAS A DOMSPACE IN ME, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO FIND IT...NO COMPASS, NO MAP...

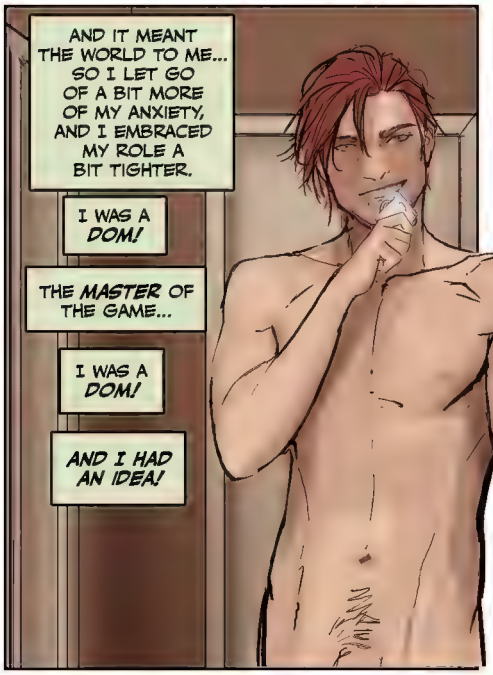
BUT AS IT TURNS OUT, I DID HAVE SOMETHING...
SOMETHING BETTER.
HEH!
I HAD A GUIDE.
YOU THINK YOU HAVE ME UNDER YOUR CONTROL?
HUH?
YOU ARE A JOKE! YOUR HIGHNESS...
WH...
I WILL BE FREE OF THESE BINDS SOON ENOUGH, AND YOU WILL KNEEL BEFORE ME LIKE THE WEAKLING THAT YOU ARE!
BUT IF YOU UNTIE ME YOURSELF, I MIGHT JUST SHOW YOU SOME LENIENCE!
I AM WAITING!
IN THE END... IT WAS SO SIMPLE.
OH, DUTCHESS... I SEE YOU NEED SOME REMINDING OF WHO BEARS THE CROWN HERE!

TO MOVE FORWARD, WE HAD TO LOOK BACK. BACK TO THE THING THAT STARTED IT ALL. OUR MOVIE -- THE LADY IN THE IRON MASK.
AND I DO MEAN WE. AS UNCONVINCING AS I WAS AS A DOM, ALLY WAS DOING NO BETTER AS A SUB. SHE WOULD NEVER ADMIT IT, BUT EVEN BACK THEN I HAD A FEELING THAT HER HEART WAS SET ON BEING A DOMME.
FOR HER, PLAYING UPON THE WELL-TRODDEN PORN TROPE OF A DOMINATRIX CONQUERED WAS THE CLOSEST SHE COULD GET TO EVEN APPROACHING A SUBSPACE.
AS FOR ME...WELL, SHE SHOWED ME THE WAY INTO MY DOMSPACE BY AWAKENING THE AWARENESS OF WHAT I LIKED IN A SUB.
DEFIANCE.
IN THE DEEPEST SHRINE THAT WAS OUR DOMSPACE, WE BOTH BELIEVED IN THE SAME RULE. A PUNISMENT IS MOST SATISFYING WHEN DESERVED.
AND NOBODY DESERVED THEIR PUNISHMENT MORE THAN A DISOBEDIENT, BRATTY SUB.
I'LL ENJOY WATCHING THAT INSOLENCE MELT FROM YOUR FACE... ONE ORGASM AT A TIME!
ALSO, BECAUSE OF THIS, ALLY WOULD LATER ON REFER TO US AS LAWFUL GOOD DOMS. HEH!


BUT YEAH...THAT'S HOW OUR FIRST GAME STARTED. WE BOTH FOUND OUR MOTIVATION THROUGH PORN. THEN AGAIN, THAT'S THE THING WITH BDSM PORN. IT HAS WAYS OF GIVING YOU IDEAS...
YOU WOULDN'T DARE!
OH, SURE, ON ANY GIVEN DAY ANYONE CAN TELL YOU THAT BASING YOUR OWN SEXUAL EXPERIENCES ON PORN IS A TERRIBLE IDEA...AND THEY'D PROBABLY BE RIGHT.
A KING DARES ALL!
OH, DEAR!
BDSM PORN, HOWEVER IS BOTH AN ENCYCLOPEDIA AND A PROOF-OF-CONCEPT FOR WILD, KINKY IDEAS. ALLY AND I WOULD END UP USING A LOT OF IT AS INSPIRATION. AS...ADVENTURE MODULES FOR OUR KINKY ROLEPLAYING GAME.
A BASIC SCRIPT TO POINT US IN A GENERAL DIRECTION, AND WHERE WE WENT FROM THERE WAS ON US.
BUT FIRST I'LL HAVE TO PUNISH THAT DEFIANCE OF YOURS.
AND YES, IF YOU WERE WONDERING, IT DID OFTEN COME OFF SOUNDING CRINGEY AS SHIT.
ANYWAYS, WHERE WAS I? AH...RIGHT...
SO, ALLY THE DEVIOUS DUTCHESS HAD PISSED OFF THE DUNGEON MASTER AND CRITICALLY FAILED HER INITIATIVE ROLL...
OKAY, LISTEN -- I'VE HAD SOME BAD TIMES IN MY LIFE AND FRIENDS HELPED ME BY... GETTING ME INTO ROLEPLAYING. LOOK, JUST...TRUST ME! THE METAPHOR WORKS!
OH... HEY, NOW!
I SUPPOSE IT'S TOO LATE FOR AN APOLOGY?
OH, YES! MUCH TOO LATE!
MNNH!


MAKE NO MISTAKE! EVEN THEN, I DESPERATELY WANTED TO ASK -- "DOES IT HURT?" "IS THIS OKAY?"
I DON'T KNOW. I GUESS I FOUND IT HARD TO GET USED TO THE IDEA OF A SAFEWORD BACK THEN. SO EVEN WITH ONE FOOT IN MY DOMSPACE, I PROCEEDED VERY HESITANTLY AT FIRST.
BUT EVERY TIME I HESITATED, SHE WOULD GIVE ME A SMALL, REASURRING SMILE.
SUCH BOLDNESS!


TRUTH WAS, SHE WAS CHEERING ME ON...
YOUR MAJESTY! I FOUND THE ROYAL SCEPTER!
IN HER OWN WAY...

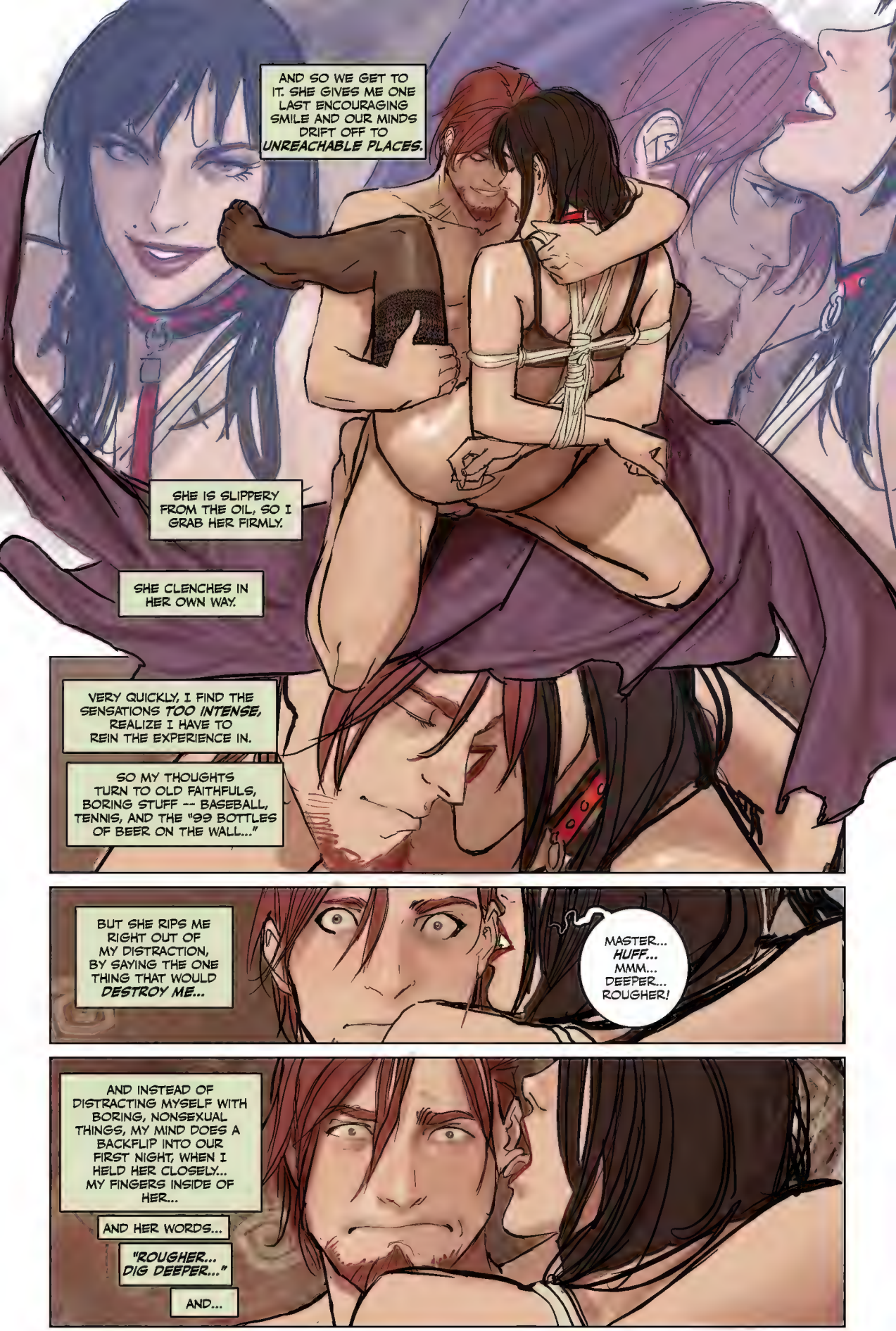

AND IT MEANT THE WORLD TO ME... SO I LET GO OF A BIT MORE OF MY ANXIETY, AND I EMBRACED MY ROLE A BIT TIGHTER.
I WAS A DOM!
THE MASTER OF THE GAME...
I WAS A DOM!
AND I HAD AN IDEA!

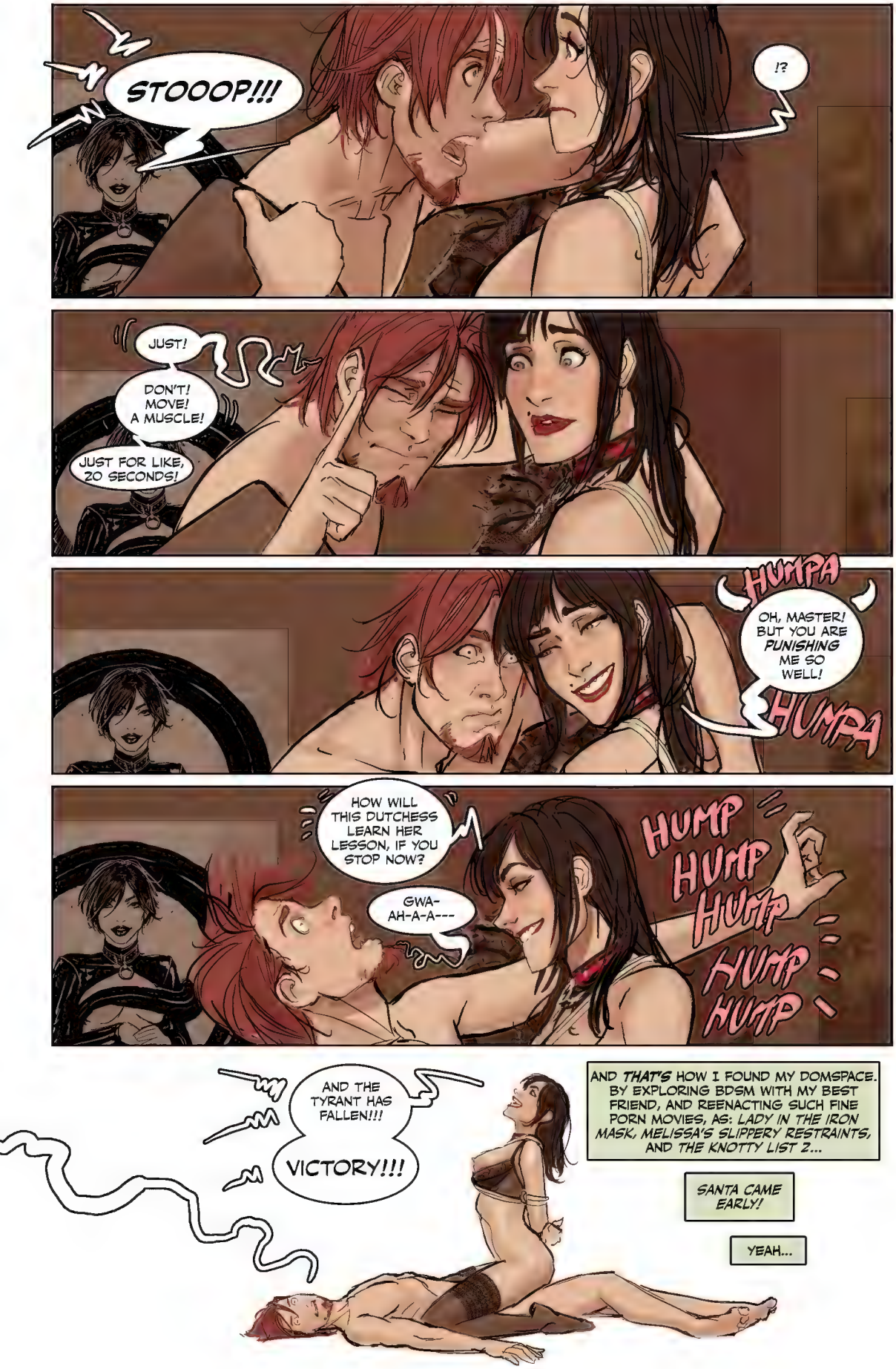
OKAY, FINE! TECHNICALLY, I BORROWED AN IDEA, FROM A DIFFERENT PORNO...MELISSA'S SLIPPERY RESTRAINTS. BUT I ADDED MY OWN LITTLE TWIST TO IT...

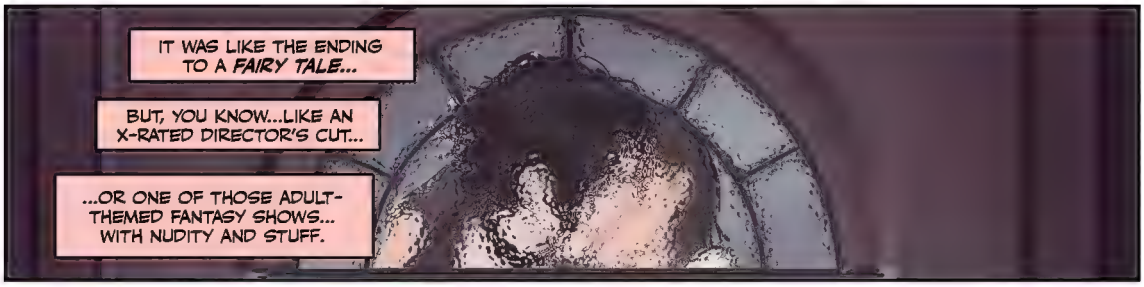
OH, HEY, NOW!

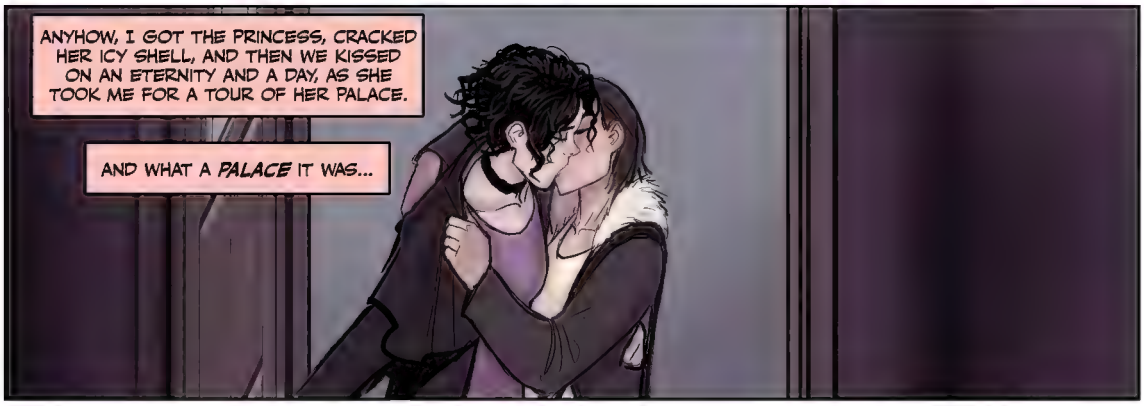
SEE...IN MELISSA'S SLIPPERY RESTRAINTS, OUR TITULAR PROTAGONIST IS BOUND, OILED, AND THEN IMMEDIATELY FUCKED.
MY TWIST...
I WAS JUST GONNA KEEP THE OILING PART GOING!
MMM... MASTER, I AM ALREADY WELL OILED...
AND GOING...
AND GOING...
MMMH...
AND GOING...
ANNNND GOING...
EVEN THEN, I WAS CATCHING ON TO THE FACT THAT ALLY WASN'T REALLY ALL THAT SUBMISSIVE.
BUT SHE WAS...
MASTER... PLEASE...
RESPONSIVE!
OH MY GOD JUST PUT IT IN AND FUCK ME ALREADY!

NOW, IS THAT ANY WAY TO TALK TO YOUR MASTER?
EEP!
MMMH!
SORRY? I MEAN --
SORRY... MASTER?
APOLOGY ACCEPTED!
MMMMMMMMM MMMMMRRNGHHH!!!
OOOH, I'LL GET YOU BACK FOR THIS WHEN IT'S MY TURN!
MAYBE, BUT FOR NOW...
SHUT IT, SLAVEGIRL!
WAH! Y-YES, MASTER!


AND SO WE GET TO IT. SHE GIVES ME ONE LAST ENCOURAGING SMILE AND OUR MINDS DRIFT OFF TO UNREACHABLE PLACES.
SHE IS SLIPPERY FROM THE OIL, SO I GRAB HER FIRMLY.
SHE CLENCHES IN HER OWN WAY.
VERY QUICKLY, I FIND THE SENSATIONS TOO INTENSE, REALIZE I HAVE TO REIN THE EXPERIENCE IN.
SO MY THOUGHTS TURN TO OLD FAITHFULS, BORING STUFF -- BASEBALL, TENNIS, AND THE "99 BOTTLES OF BEER ON THE WALL..."
BUT SHE RIPS ME RIGHT OUT OF MY DISTRACTION, BY SAYING THE ONE THING THAT WOULD DESTROY ME...
MASTER... HUFF... MMM... DEEPER... ROUGHER!
AND INSTEAD OF DISTRACTING MYSELF WITH BORING, NONSEXUAL THINGS, MY MIND DOES A BACKFLIP INTO OUR FIRST NIGHT, WHEN I HELD HER CLOSELY... MY FINGERS INSIDE OF HER...
AND HER WORDS...
"ROUGHER... DIG DEEPER..."
AND...

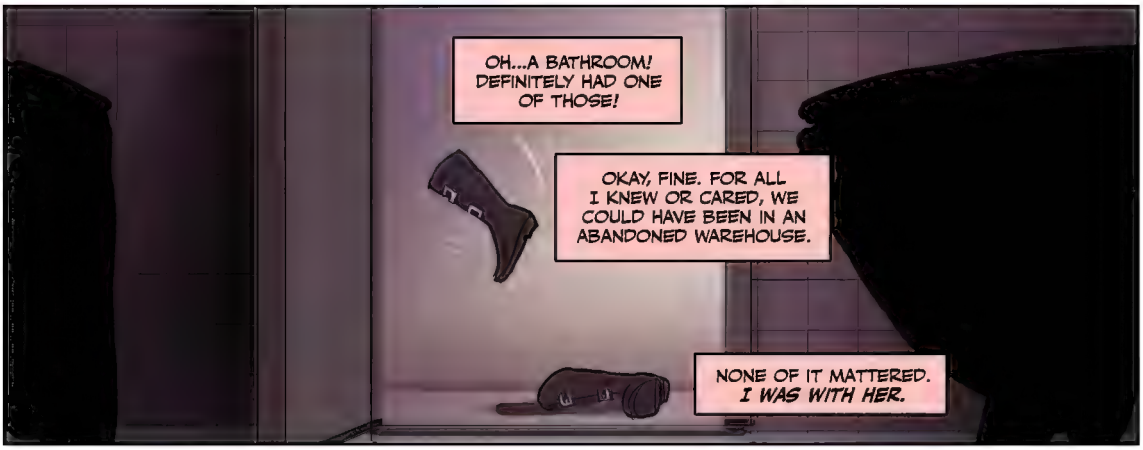

STOOOP!!!
!?
JUST!
DON'T! MOVE! A MUSCLE!
JUST FOR LIKE, 20 SECONDS!
HUMPA
OH, MASTER! BUT YOU ARE PUNISHING ME SO WELL!
HUMPA
HOW WILL THIS DUTCHESS LEARN HER LESSON, IF YOU STOP NOW?
GWA-AH-A-A---
HUMP HUMP HUMP HUMP HUMP
AND THE TYRANT HAS FALLEN!!!
VICTORY!!!
AND THAT'S HOW I FOUND MY DOMSPACE. BY EXPLORING BDSM WITH MY BEST FRIEND, AND REENACTING SUCH FINE PORN MOVIES, AS: LADY IN THE IRON MASK, MELISSA'S SLIPPERY RESTRAINTS, AND THE KNOTTY LIST 2...
SANTA CAME EARLY!
YEAH...


IT WAS LIKE THE ENDING TO A *FAIRY TALE...*
BUT, YOU KNOW...LIKE AN X-RATED DIRECTOR'S CUT...
...OR ONE OF THOSE ADULT-THEMED FANTASY SHOWS... WITH NUDITY AND STUFF.

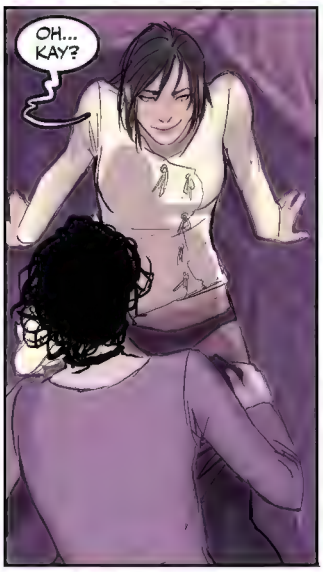

ANYHOW, I GOT THE PRINCESS, CRACKED HER ICY SHELL, AND THEN WE KISSED ON AN ETERNITY AND A DAY, AS SHE TOOK ME FOR A TOUR OF HER PALACE.
AND WHAT A *PALACE* IT WAS...

THERE WAS A LIVING ROOM...

A KITCHEN...


OH...A BATHROOM! DEFINITELY HAD ONE OF THOSE!
OKAY, FINE. FOR ALL I KNEW OR CARED, WE COULD HAVE BEEN IN AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE.
NONE OF IT MATTERED. *I WAS WITH HER.*

MMMH...NICE PLACE!
MMM... THANK YOU!


OH... KAY?

YOU SURE SEEM EAGER...
WHA? UHH...TOO FAST?

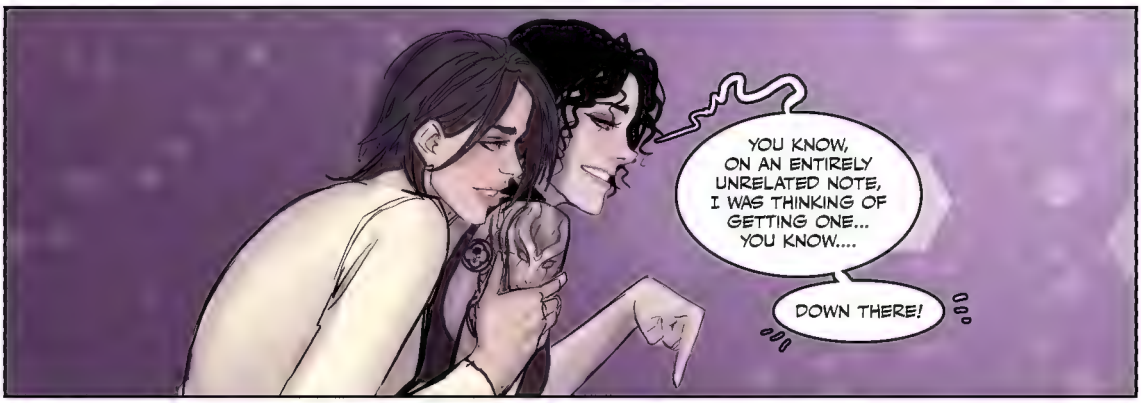
NO, BUT RELAX. YOU HAVE ME FOR THE WHOLE NIGHT!
HEH...YEAH... I ACTUALLY DO, DON'T I?

OKAY...UHH... SO, HOW ABOUT SOME DRINKS, THEN?
I PROMISE I WON'T TELL ANYONE...
IT WAS SO ENDEARING. OUTSIDE THE SAFETY OF A METAL CONCERT, WITH NO AGE JOKES TO COVER HER INSECURITY, SHE WAS A BIT OF AN *AWKWARD MESS.*

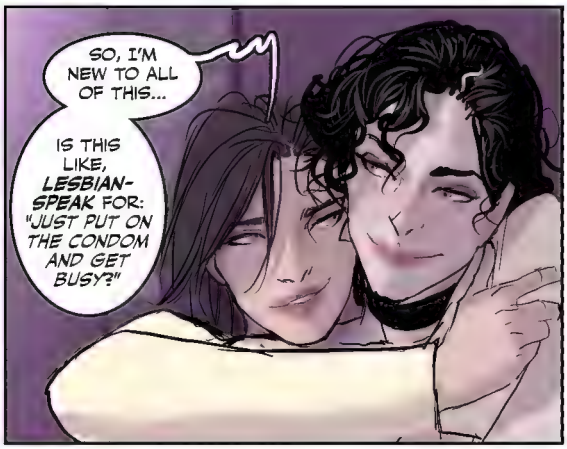
YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M GOOD. I DON'T THINK I NEED ANY MORE *LUBRICANT,* SOCIAL OR OTHERWISE!
THERE WAS AN HONEST EAGERNESS TO HER THAT MADE ME WANT HER EVEN MORE...
IN FACT, I THOUGHT THEN AND THERE... *"SHE COULD NOT BE ANY SEXIER THAN SHE IS RIGHT NOW!"*

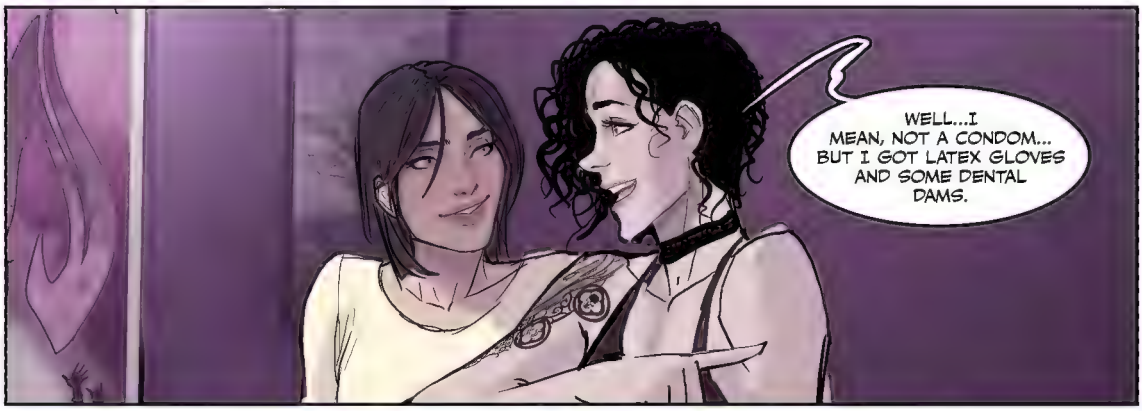
I WAS WRONG!
I THINK I MAY GET ONE...
!
?
UH...MARIA...
SSSSHH... NO TALKING! ADMIRING ART!
THIS IS... GORGEOUS!
EHUEHUE... UH...I MEAN, THANKS?
AND THAT WAS HOW I DISCOVERED THAT INK WAS MY FIRST KINK.
AND THAT IS HOW LAURA DISCOVERED THAT MY INK KINK WAS HER KINK.

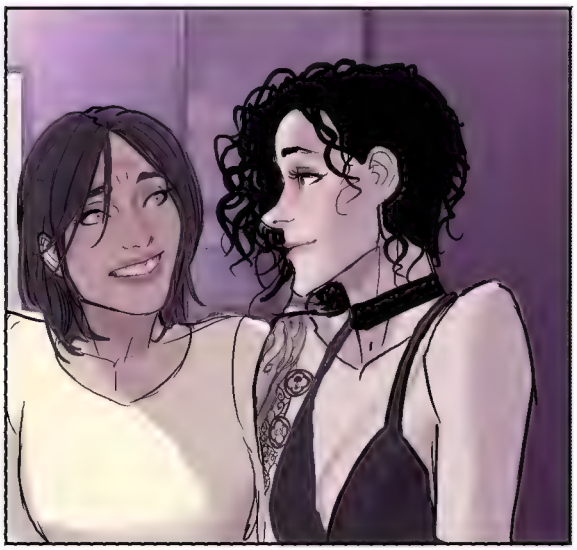
COME HERE!
WAH!
DID IT HURT?
I GUESS? I MEAN, PARTS OF IT DID. SPINE AND SUCH...
OH...WELL THAT'S JUST TERRIBLE.
PRETTY BUTTERFLY HAS A MEAN BITE, HUH?
HEH!
OKAY, DONE ADMIRING THE ART?
NOPE! THE MEAN BUTTERFLY HURT YOU, AND NOW I HAVE TO LICK IT BETTER!
EHWEH!?
TRANSLATION: "DON'T YOU MEAN KISS IT BETTER?"

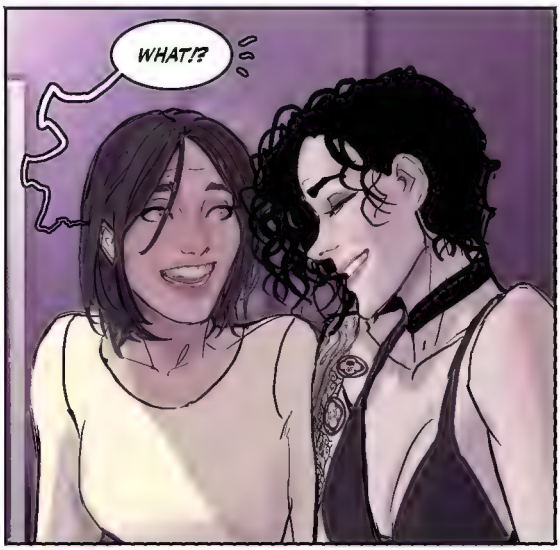

YOU KNOW, ON AN ENTIRELY UNRELATED NOTE, I WAS THINKING OF GETTING ONE... YOU KNOW....
DOWN THERE!

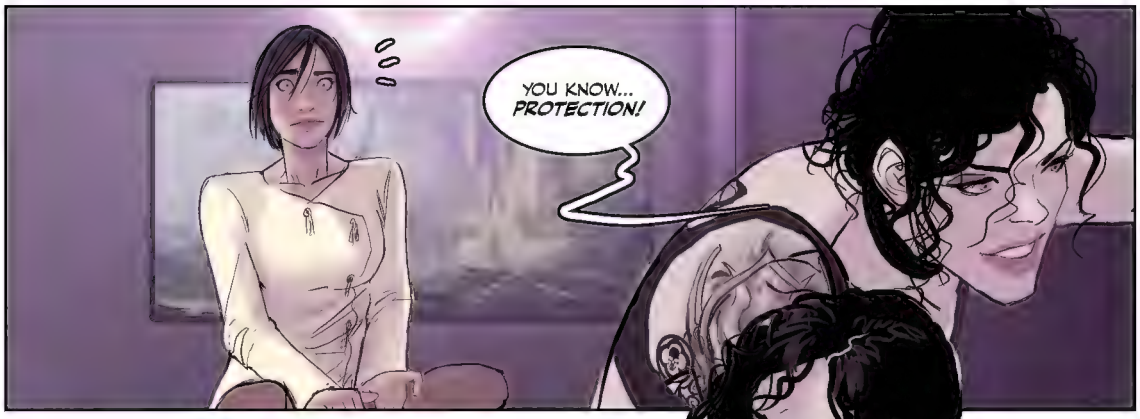
NOT *IMPLYING* ANYTHING.
MHM...

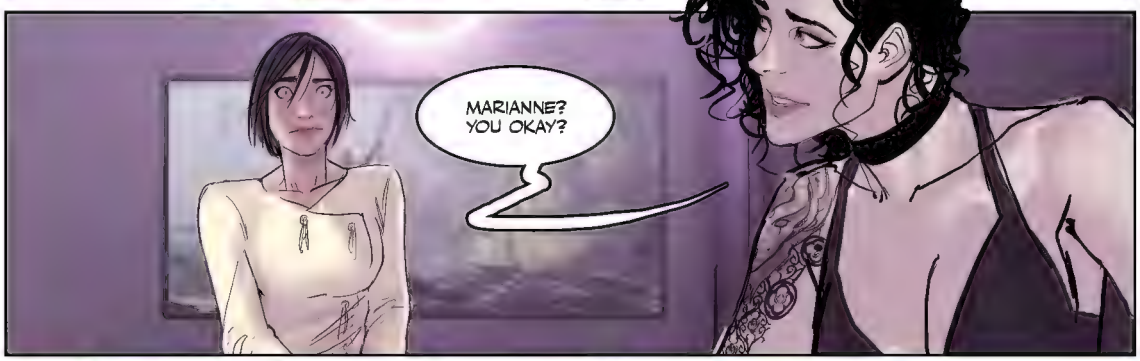

SO, I'M NEW TO ALL OF THIS...
IS THIS LIKE, ***LESBIAN-SPEAK*** FOR: *"JUST PUT ON THE CONDOM AND GET BUSY?"*

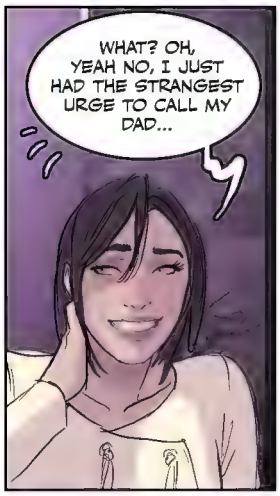

WELL...I MEAN, NOT A CONDOM... BUT I GOT LATEX GLOVES AND SOME DENTAL DAMS.

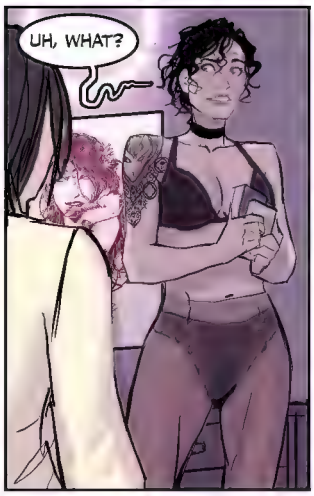



WHAT!?


YOU KNOW... PROTECTION!


MARIANNE? YOU OKAY?


WHAT? OH, YEAH NO, I JUST HAD THE STRANGEST URGE TO CALL MY DAD...


UH, WHAT?

LONG STORY... BUT SERIOUSLY? THERE'S ACTUAL PROTECTION?

HEH! YEAH... TRUST ME, I WAS JUST AS SURPRISED.
REMEMBER MY LAST GIRLFRIEND?
THE PIXIE?

YEAH...WELL, I TOLD YOU SHE CHEATED ON ME. AFTER THAT I HAD SOME...TRUST ISSUES.
ONE OF THEM BEING THE VERY REAL FEAR OF THE LITTLE BITCH INFECTING ME WITH SOME SHIT SHE MIGHT HAVE PICKED UP RIDING ON RANDOM DICKS...

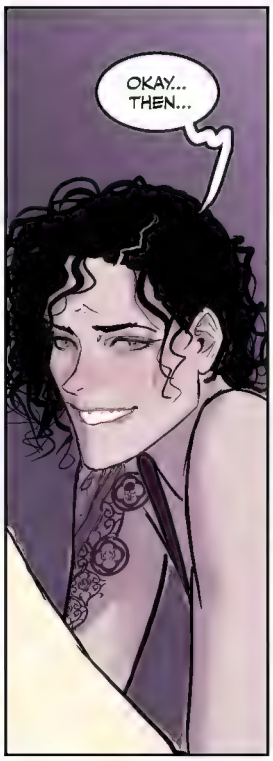
SO I GOT MYSELF TESTED FOR EVERYTHING AND THE KITCHEN SINK. I GOT A NICE OB-GYN...SHE ALSO GAVE ME A BUNCH OF SAFE SEX TIPS, AND HERE WE ARE...

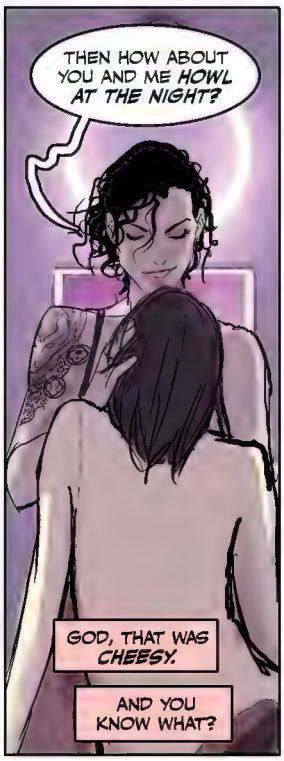
I'M GUESSING THIS TALK PRETTY MUCH MADE YOU DRIER THAN THE SAHARA?

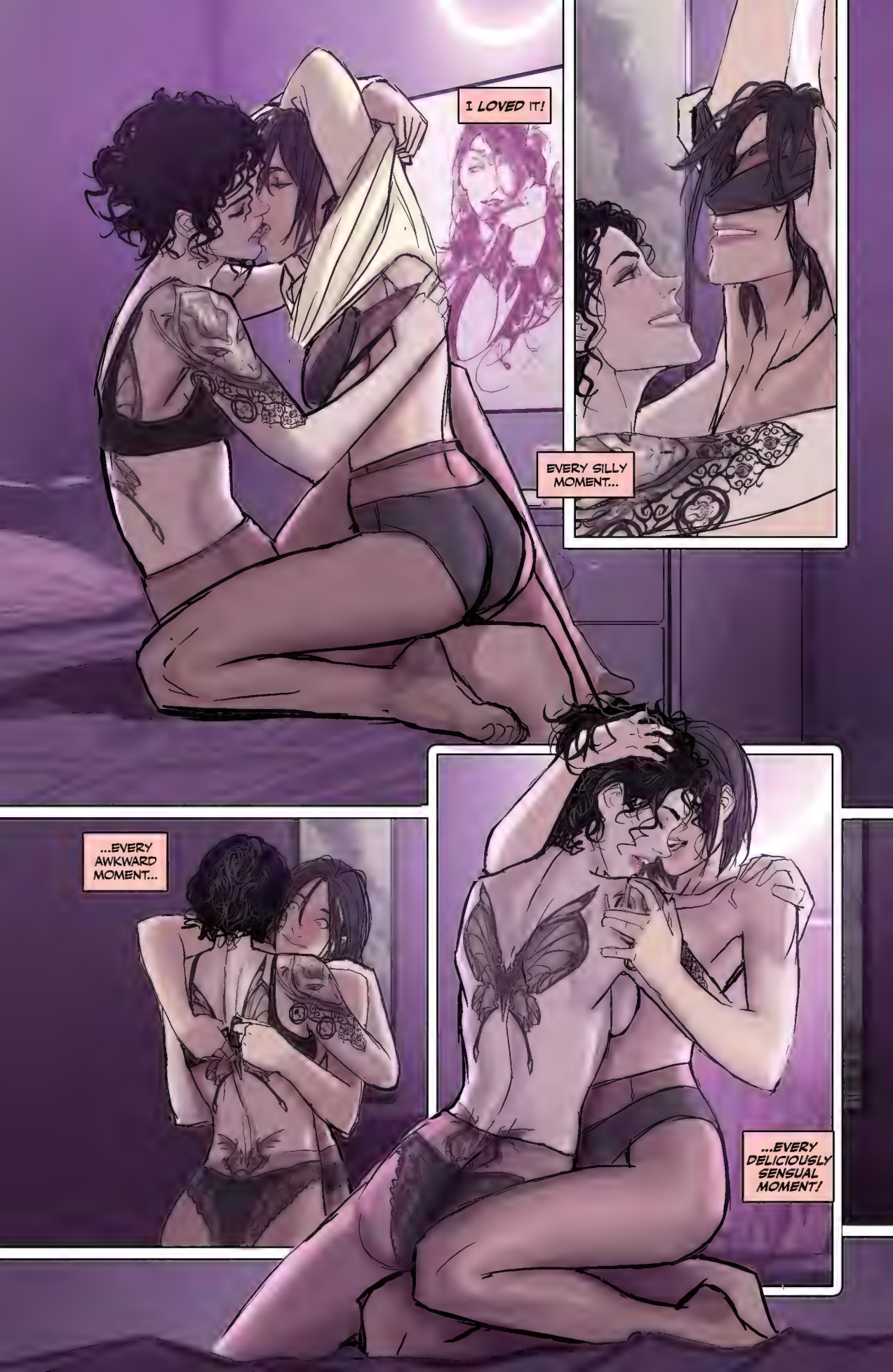
HOLD THAT THOUGHT!
NOPE. STILL GOOD!
KHEHEHEH!
SO...OKAY, I GET THE GLOVES, BUT...THE FUCK IS THE *DENTAL DAM?*
'CAUSE...I'LL PLAY DOCTOR WITH YOU ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, BUT I DRAW THE LINE AT DENTIST!
PFFFT!!!
ANNNND A FEW MOMENTS LATER...
SO, A DENTAL DAM IS A SQUARE PIECE OF LATEX THAT YOU PUT LIKE A BLANKET OVER A PUSSY AND YOU...UM... *LICK THE LATEX?*
LAURA... YOU ARE INTO SOME WEIRD SHIT!
HEY! I JUST GOT THE FUCKING THING! I NEVER ACTUALLY *USED* IT!
UH-HUH...
HEY, LAURA?
DOEF FHIS TUWN WOU ON?
BWAHAHAHAHAHHAAH

HEHEH...HEH... OKAY. CARDS ON THE TABLE, I AM ABSOLUTELY CLEAN SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THAT.

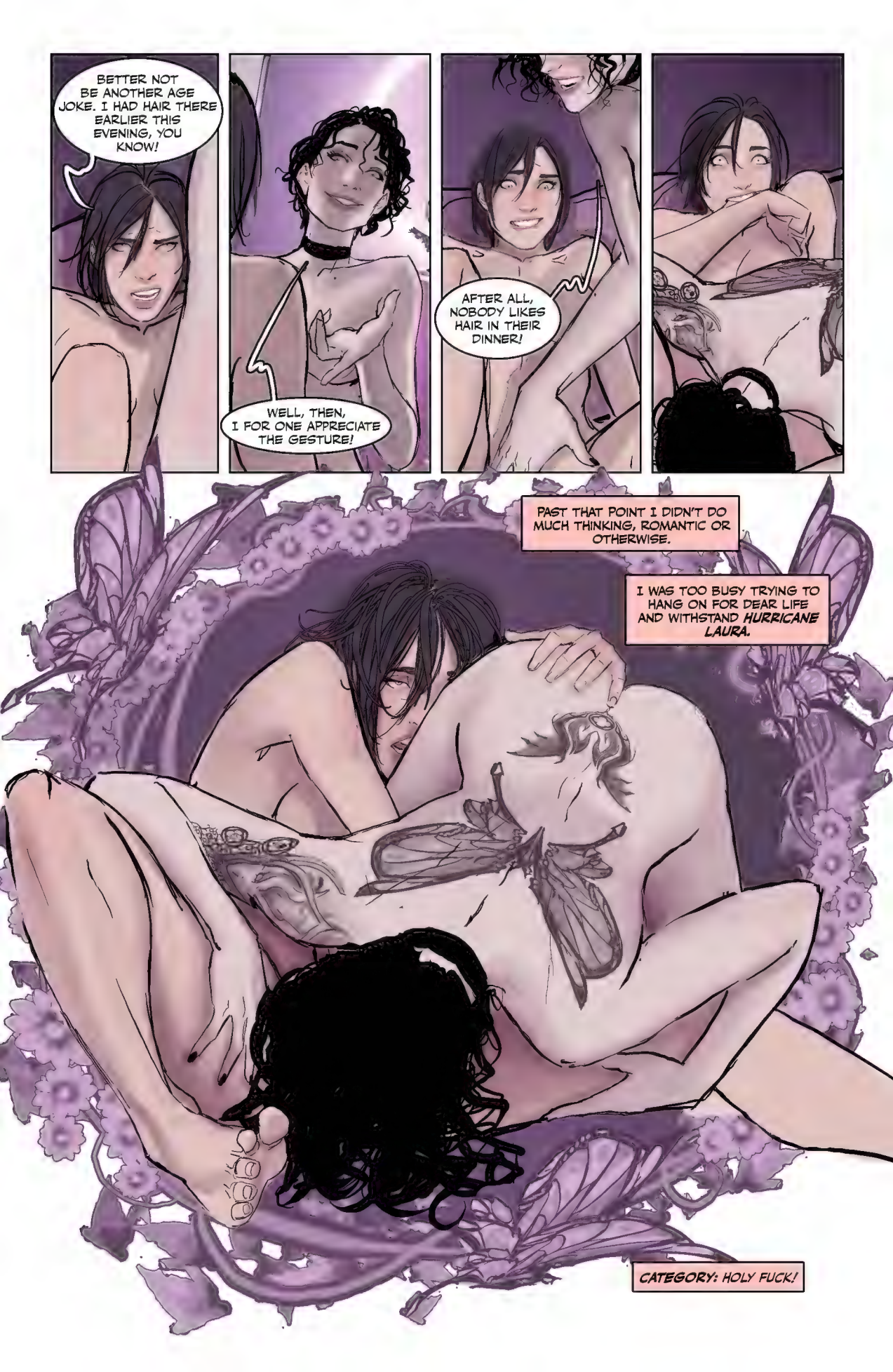
OKAY...FAIR ENOUGH.





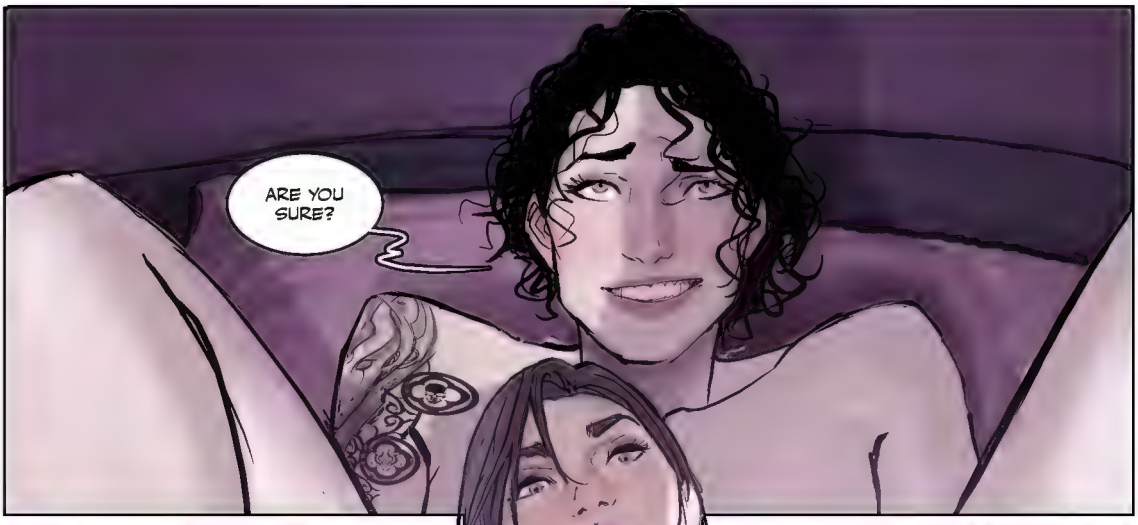

I LOVED IT!
EVERY SILLY MOMENT...
...EVERY AWKWARD MOMENT...
...EVERY DELICIOUSLY SENSUAL MOMENT!

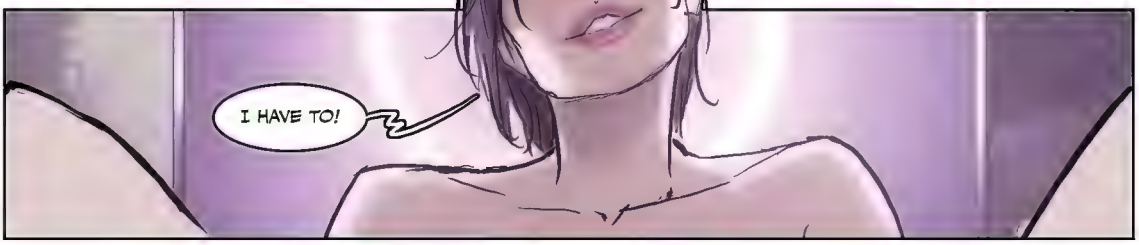
I LOVED THEM ALL.
AND MORE THAN ALL OF IT...
I LOVED HER!
I THOUGHT IT EVERY TIME SHE SMILED.
"FIVE CONCERTS AND A BAD DATE AND I FUCKING LOVE YOU!"
YOU KNOW, IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME! I COULD ACTUALLY PUT SOME MUSIC ON IF YOU --
WANT...
WHAT?
I...
I'M SORRY... I'M JUST... SPEECHLESS.
LIKE, I'M LITERALLY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO SAY...


BETTER NOT BE ANOTHER AGE JOKE. I HAD HAIR THERE EARLIER THIS EVENING, YOU KNOW!
WELL, THEN, I FOR ONE APPRECIATE THE GESTURE!
AFTER ALL, NOBODY LIKES HAIR IN THEIR DINNER!
PAST THAT POINT I DIDN'T DO MUCH THINKING, ROMANTIC OR OTHERWISE.
I WAS TOO BUSY TRYING TO HANG ON FOR DEAR LIFE AND WITHSTAND *HURRICANE LAURA.*
CATEGORY: HOLY FUCK!

OH, WAIT! ACTUALLY --
THIS WILL BE IMPORTANT MUCH LATER!

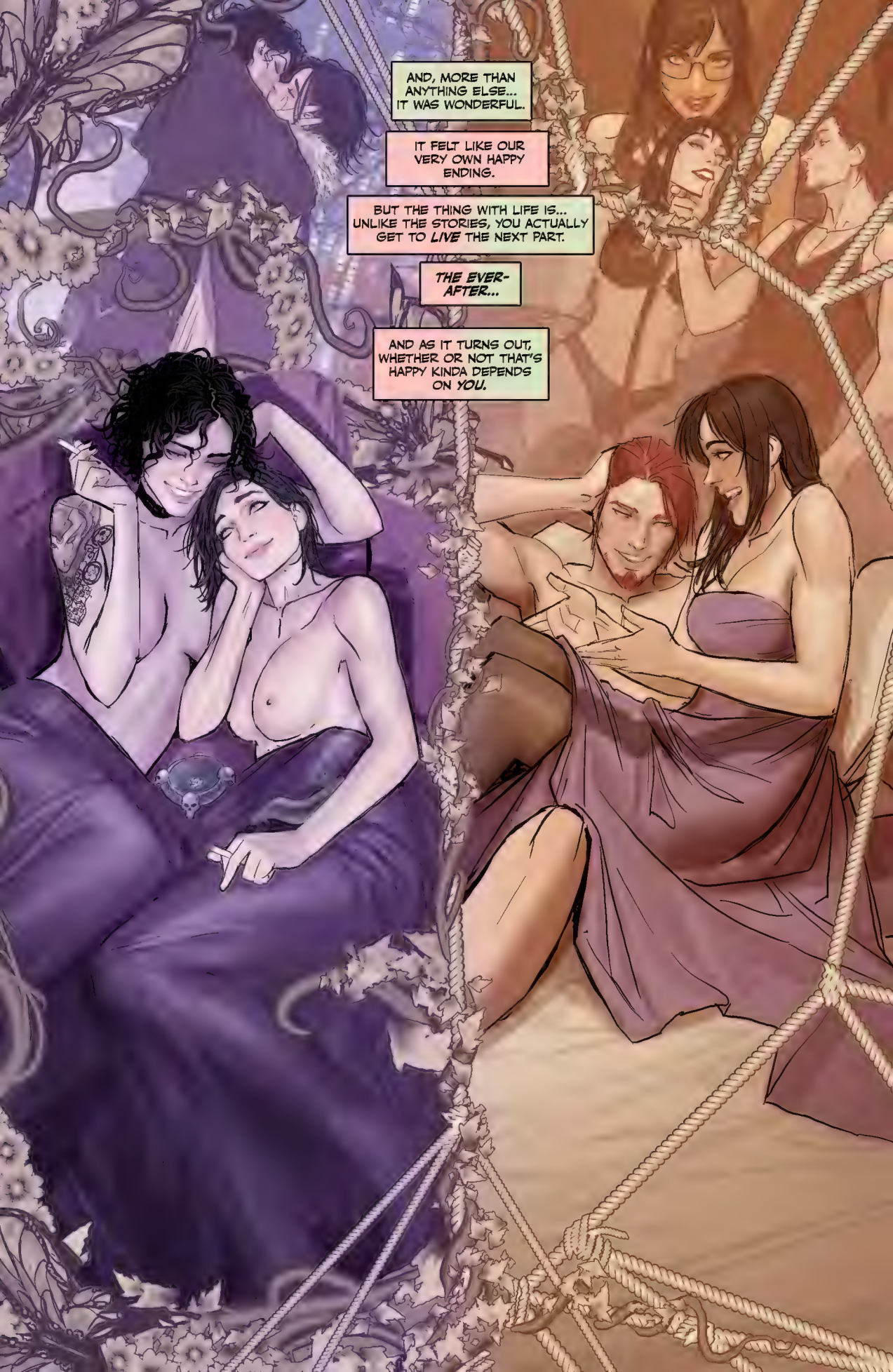
SO, IT WAS MY TURN TO RETURN THE FAVOR, AND...



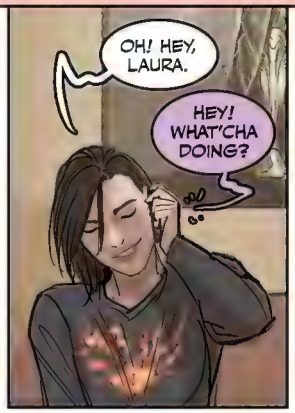


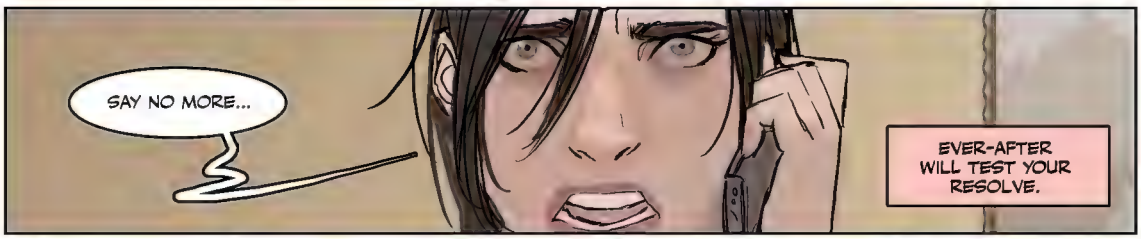
WOW.
THIS THING FUCKING SUCKS!
PFFFFT
BWAHAHA HAHAH

IN HINDSIGHT, IT TRULY WAS AN UNLIKELY ROMANCE.
SUCH AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP...
AND IT ALL STARTED THE DAY I TOOK THAT PHOTO OF HER...
OUR CRAZY JOURNEY DOWN AN UNCHARTED PATH...
IT WAS EXHILARATING!
IT WAS EXCITING!
IT WAS... UNEXPECTED...
INTENSE...

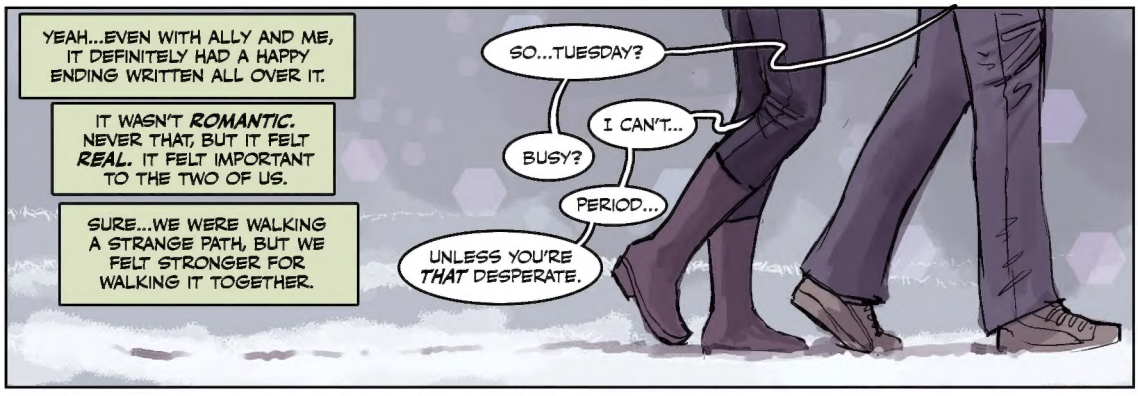

AND, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE... IT WAS WONDERFUL.
IT FELT LIKE OUR VERY OWN HAPPY ENDING.
BUT THE THING WITH LIFE IS... UNLIKE THE STORIES, YOU ACTUALLY GET TO *LIVE* THE NEXT PART.
THE EVER-AFTER...
AND AS IT TURNS OUT, WHETHER OR NOT THAT'S HAPPY KINDA DEPENDS ON *YOU.*

YEAH. THE EVER-AFTER PART IS A MESSY BUSINESS. IT'S LIFE'S GREAT EXTENDED POST-CREDITS SCENE, AFTER YOU JUST GOT DONE WITH YOUR HAPPY ENDING. AND YES! IT MORE OFTEN THAN NOT ALSO CONTAINS THE ***BLOOPER REEL.***





...BUT IN THE END, IF YOU TRULY LOVE THE PERSON, IF THEY ARE WORTH IT...YOU WILL FIGHT FOR YOUR EVER-AFTER TO BE A HAPPY ONE!
TRUTH WAS... I *DID* LOVE HER.
FUN, GORGEOUS, EQUAL PARTS EXCITING AND VULNERABLE.
IT'S KINDA FUNNY, THOUGH!
WHAT IS?
AND CAPABLE OF SAYING THE ABSOLUTE *WORST* THINGS AT THE *WORST* TIMES!
THE DAY AFTER I GO DOWN ON YOU, I GET SICK AND YOU GET A CROTCH ITCH!
I FUCKING KNEW IT!
UNIVERSE, GIVE ME THE STRENGTH *NOT* TO CHOKE OUT MY GIRLFRIEND!
SHE WAS MY HAPPY ENDING.
MY *FIRST* HAPPY ENDING.
WHAT FOLLOWED IS THE STORY OF OUR EVER-AFTER...AND IT WAS A *WILD* ONE!



IN THE END, OUR EVER-AFTER WAS A JOURNEY.

I WAS A GUY WHO HAD NO IDEA WHERE I WANTED TO GO.

SHE WAS A GIRL WHO REFUSED TO ADMIT SHE KNEW EXACTLY WHERE SHE WANTED TO GO.

SO, THAT'S YOUR LEANING?

WHAT? NO! I JUST THINK I'D BE GOOD AT IT.

HEY, I DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH YOU BEING NATURALLY DOMINANT...

WE WERE TWO WANDERERS MAKING OUR OWN ROAD.

AND WE WERE JUST GETTING STARTED.
YEAH...SPEAKING OF PROBLEMS, WE'LL HAVE TO WORK ON YOUR LITTLE STAMINA ISSUE...
UGH...
YEAH...
GONNA HAVE TO RESEARCH ORGASM DENIAL.
FUN!
SO...UH...MY TURN -- COULD WE DO IT ON THE TWENTY-SECOND?
WHY NOT THE TWENTY-FOURTH?
OH...SO THAT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY GIFT TO ME?
NOPE...I GOT ONE BETTER.
BY THE WAY...GIVEN ANY THOUGHT TO YOUR SAFEWORD?
YEAH...
SUNSTONE!
...
SO THAT'S LIKE, A TEMPORARY SAFEWORD, OR?
OH, YOU ARE SO FUCKED!
HEH! YES, MISTRESS!

"It felt like our very own happy ending."

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